



The Spirit of Youth

At a time of life when limits can't be seen, it's natural to have big ideas. But the voices of the young too often go unheard. International Youth Year has drawn attention to their idealistic urgings. We should all 'think young' if we are to make this a better world . . .

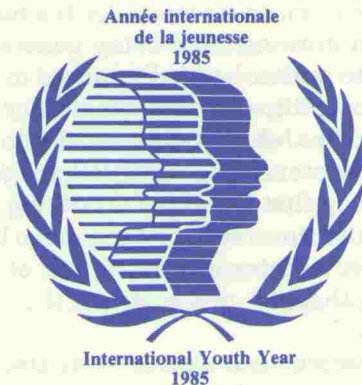
□ One of the objects of the United Nations International Youth Year which is now drawing to a close was simply to get mature adults to think about young people. Activities have been conducted around the world to increase public awareness of the interests, concerns and achievements of the 15-to-24 age group.

In fact, though, people have always thought quite a lot about youth, if not in the positive fashion the IYY's organizers might wish them to. The younger generation has no doubt been a popular topic of conversation ever since man first put thoughts into words.

We have no way of knowing what people actually said about youth in centuries past, but we do know what has been written about it. A quick survey of the literature on the subject throughout recorded history shows a remarkable consistency of opinion. In every era, learned men and women have agreed that the young people around them were sloppily educated, poorly motivated, bereft of social graces, and ill-equipped to take over the running of the world.

Somehow the world has run on, but the timeless cycle has continued. Members of each succeeding generation have convinced themselves that those in the one behind them are lacking in the admirable qualities which they possessed at that age.

A chemical change seems to come over parents when their children reach their teens which retroactively endows them with virtues they may never have had in the first place. As the witticism goes, "The older you get, the better you get when you were young."



The tension in the air between the junior and senior generations springs from the propensity of each to overestimate itself and underestimate the other. Parents complain that their older children lack common sense, while their offspring regard them as mentally sluggish and pitifully out of touch with current reality.

The failure to appreciate each other's strengths has to do with the way time creeps by at 20 and flies by at 40. Thus the father who deplores his son's foolishness forgets how long it took him to acquire good sense and assumes he always had it. The son who thinks his father is stuck in the mud concludes that the changes he sees around him are more fundamental and permanent than they actually are, because a month to him is like a year in middle age.

It is almost constitutionally impossible for the young to take the long view of affairs, for the good reason that they have not lived long enough to gain perspective. They cannot see that the current trends which loom so large in their lives are mostly transitory. Their natural shortsightedness leads many of them to believe that a whole new age has dawned, and to consign to irrelevancy all that has gone before.

Anyone who might think that this is a product of modern trends such as television or permissive education may refer back to the words of Dr. Samuel Johnson in the mid-18th century: "The mental disease of the present generation is impatience of study, contempt of the great masters of ancient wisdom, and a disposition to rely wholly upon unassisted genius and natural sagacity."

The generation to which he referred must have gone on to mend its ways, for the body of learning kept on growing. And every generation since has added to it after being denounced in its turn for its ignorance, illiteracy and illogicality.

Still, Dr. Johnson did a service to those seeking to understand the generation gap today by indicating that the gap has nothing to do with the particular times society happens to be undergoing. It is not a factor of history, but of the difference in the thought processes of the respective age groups.

In general (and all that is written here is necessarily in general, since it covers such a mass of individuals) youths arrive at conclusions out of intuition. Their feelings, senses, inspirations and perceptions are the raw material of their ideas. Older people are more inclined to take the empirical route to knowledge. They depend on proven evidence to show them what is and is not true.

Both approaches have their merits. One could hardly audit a set of accounts or draw up the plans for a skyscraper on the basis of "gut feeling." If, on the other hand, Albert Einstein had proceeded solely according to facts that had been proved in the past, he would never have formed his theory of relativity.

Because of their intuitive approach and because they are unfamiliar with the restrictive details, youths tend to theorize and generalize. Their intellectual presumptions are a source of irritation to some and amusement to others. "Young men are apt to think themselves wise enough, as drunken men are apt to think themselves sober enough," Lord Chesterfield wrote grumpily. The playwright James M. Barrie was more good-natured about it: "I am not young enough to know everything."

The fact that most youthful theories prove to be impractical makes seasoned adults disinclined to take them seriously. Parents are forever protesting that their teenaged children won't listen to them, but they are frequently guilty of the same offence in reverse.

Older people are quick to "pull rank" in discussions with their juniors by invoking their superior experience. Experience is certainly a good teacher,

but as Mark Twain advised, we must be careful to take from it only the value that is in it: "...lest we be like the cat that sits down on a hot stove lid. She will never sit down on a hot stove lid again — and that is well: but also she will never sit down on a cold one any more."

It is one of life's ironies that youth puts too much stock in the possibilities of trial while age puts too much in the consequences of error. The inner voices of novices may urge them into actions which they may later regret, but the inner voices of veterans warn them, often falsely, to fear the worst.

People who look too long at the dark side of experience always know more about what can't be done than about what can be. A hundred years ago, the voice of experience was saying that it was impossible for a man to fly.

In the world of ideas, the very *inexperience* of youth is sometimes its strongest asset. Guglielmo Marconi could not have assembled all the facts as to why words could not be sent invisibly through thin air when he conceived that notion at the age of 22.

The young are more inclined to be ashamed of themselves

The boldness of youth and the caution of age have never co-existed comfortably. In an essay published in 1625, Francis Bacon applied his mighty mind to the duality and found both sides wanting: "Young men, in the conduct and management of actions, embrace more than they can hold; stir more than they can quiet; fly to the end without consideration of the means and degrees... Men of age object too much, adventure too little, repent too soon, and seldom drive business home to its full period, but content themselves with a mediocrity of success."

"If youth but knew and age were able, then poverty would be a fable," runs a rueful old proverb. It is another of life's ironies that the vigour of youth and the moderation of age are seldom brought into balance within a single character. The most Francis

Bacon could suggest to correct the situation was a rough division of labour. Young people would invent and initiate projects, while their elders would use their well-tempered judgement to advise them on how best to get the job done.

Such arrangements work well enough when they are tried, but they are probably not tried often enough for the good of society. The aging process causes people to become set in their ways, and reluctant to go along with the changes their juniors press upon them. Their reluctance is reinforced when, as often occurs, they come to feel threatened by youthful drive, assertiveness and energy. The handy way to protect oneself from this perceived threat is to find practical reasons why youthful proposals can't be put into effect.

If the weakness of youth is recklessness, the weakness of later age is expediency. The dictionary defines expedient behaviour as "politic rather than just." People who acquire familial and other responsibilities normally become more concerned with their own interests than with those of society in general. They concentrate first on doing what is right for themselves instead of what is right for everyone.

"For the moral part, perhaps youth will have the preeminence, as age has for the politic," Bacon observed. The idealistic young man fighting for principle in the face of expediency is a familiar figure in literature. People seem to be born with a sense of justice which surfaces early in their lives; "that's not fair" is a common cry in early childhood. The sense grows keener through the teens and early twenties, then begins to lose its edge as it comes up against the disillusioning facts of life.

The young are more likely to feel shame than their elders, since our capacity for being ashamed of ourselves diminishes in proportion to the number of times we are able to commit equivocal acts and get away with them. "Youth does not dare look at itself in the mirror of conscience when it is leaning towards injustice," Balzac wrote. "Maturity has seen itself there at such a moment — in this lies all the difference between the two periods of life."

Of course, the youthful instinct for justice is not infallible. Terrible atrocities have been perpetrated by youths under the spell of demagogic leaders who have persuaded them that they must persecute others to gain "justice" for their own groups. Even when they are misled, however, they are on the whole more willing than older people to sacrifice themselves for what they believe is right.

Youth is posing hard questions to the generation now in control

Given an enlightened education, their desire for social justice and concern for others surmounts the barriers of race and religion erected by those whose beliefs have grown rigid. It takes an effort on the part of their mentors to narrow down their minds. In this age of communications, their humanitarianism also crosses international boundaries. An example was the recent campaign by young people in western nations to alleviate famine in Africa which rallied around the slogan, "We Are The World."

In their willingness to share, their compassion, their internationalism and their wish to see justice done, the youth of today is tacitly asking the generation in control of affairs some highly disconcerting questions: Why should people go hungry? Why should they be brutalized? Why should they have to live in a dirty environment? Why shouldn't everybody live in reasonable comfort, dignity, freedom and peace?

The answers look obvious to any mature person applying empirical reasoning. The record shows that this bad old world only changes very slowly. Well-meaning groups have been trying to bring about improvements in life on earth for centuries now, yet war, famine, sickness, political oppression and social injustice still abound.

On the great question of life and death that hangs over us all, young people can coolly be told that nuclear disarmament has been talked about practically since the day the first atomic bomb was dropped, and still the power to destroy the planet keeps swelling. Short of being deprived by nuclear war of any future at all, many youths, even in the prosperous western countries, face a future in which they cannot depend upon finding steady employ-



ment. Again, empirical logic based on past experience can demonstrate that it is difficult to order the economy in such a way as to provide jobs for all.

So a rational person looking at the background of attempts to improve the lot of mankind might well advise young people to forget the big picture and focus on their own personal welfare. Fortunately, youth is not too rational. It does not look back to the discouraging account of what has been, but forward to the ideal of what should be.

An excess of realism can lead to pessimism, apathy and action

Idealism is the public version of private hope, and hope does not always stand up to empirical examination. Everyone knows from experience that many hopes are ultimately dashed. Still, the wise Dr. Johnson's thoughts on the subject are as valid to the society as they are to the individual: "It is necessary to hope, though hope should always be deluded; for hope itself is happiness, and its frustrations, however frequent, are less dreadful than its extinction," he wrote.

Hope is the strongest weapon in the spiritual arsenal of youth. Young people can be battered down again and again, and still come up with fresh possibilities to sustain them. But they are also impressionable and changeable, so their hopes can be lost.

It is vital for members of the present parental generation to keep youthful hope and idealism alive. This is especially so at a time when realism is the order of the day. After the economic and political disappointments of the past few years, there has been a growing tendency to urge young people to be realistic about the future. But we must be careful that our "realism" is not merely pessimism in disguise.

Usually, the man who cries the loudest that we must be realistic is not a realist in the true sense of the word at all. He has his eyes firmly fixed on the negative side of any question. To him, the glass is always half-empty, never half-full. This pessimism

by another name only leads to apathy and inaction. People who are convinced that the worst is bound to happen stop trying to do anything about it. In this way, they help to make their own gloomy prophecies come true.

Thankfully, the buoyant spirit of youth is not easily talked down. Opinion surveys among Canadians from the ages of 18 to 24 show a surprising degree of confidence in the economic future together with strong social conscience. The results indicate that Canadian youths today are more education-minded, more enterprising and more self-reliant than the generations before them. They are realistic, yes; but not pessimistic. They see the glass as half-full.

They might, indeed, be more truly realistic than some of their elders by the very measures those elders insist on applying. For the record empirically shows that the human condition can indeed be improved.

Wherever progress has been made, the force behind it has always been a dissatisfaction with the status quo and an insistence that no problem is insoluble. Though these are typically youthful sentiments, youth has never been alone in taking such an idealistic stance.

The generation gap has always been bridged by the young in spirit of any age who continually restore their own confidence and creativity by paying attention to the thoughts, hopes and dreams of young people and not dismissing them with self-assumed superior wisdom. The young in spirit realize that progress is not to be made by expediency or jaundiced realism. The impetus must come from the venturesome heart, not the calculating head.

Young people are constantly being told not to be so impatient, but if there was ever anything to be impatient about, it is the wretchedness that besets so much of humanity. Rather than cautioning them to slow down in their drive for a better world, members of the other generations should be throwing their own particular abilities into an alliance with them to accelerate the process as much as possible. Youths are notorious for having big ideas. The biggest idea of all — that peace and prosperity can be made to reign on earth — is one that cries out for the active support of their fellow human beings of any age.