

## The Adolescents Search For Identity

by Margaret Lowenfeld

The Sixth International Congress of Child Psychiatry

Edinburgh – July 24-29 1966

(exactly as given)



My task is to attempt to present an approach to adolescent problems which may seem an unusual one. My theme is the adolescent in 1966: what is his situation? And that of society in regard to him? How do the two interact?

In essence, the situation of the adolescent is biological in nature. With the onset of puberty the adolescent feels a surging sense of power within him. Pictures come into his mind of great achievement for himself: of reforming abuses, redressing grievances changing world conditions. The vagueness of content and the mistiness of outline of these pictures render them absurd or incomprehensible to his surrounding adults. Their incomprehension drives him into strident battle with the members of his family, and from them to the outside world. The feeling of power is strong, but for this to turn into the deep satisfaction of achievement, in my view, certain specific conditions are necessary. An abiding sense of acceptance within a group: participation in corporate adventures and disciplines and a long series of small acknowledged achievements, and forgiven failures, which integrate him firmly into the group and add to the attainment of the group's objectives. When these moulding conditions are absent the surge of force within an adolescent remains formless and frightening, driving him to seek the shelter of the accustomed and the safety of the known. At one and the same time therefore, he is a child seeking protection and a rebel driven by whirlwinds beyond his control.

While the dilemma of the individual adolescent is in its nature a biological one, so also, in my view, is the relation between the adolescent and society. In all periods there is a tendency for organised society become conservative, hardened into fixed viewpoints, resistive to new conceptions and fearful of loss of power. The force, the idealism, enthusiasm, courage, endurance and imagination of the adolescent, when welcomed and gradually assimilated by society, can, by their very extravagance, renew life in society, enlarge vision and change directives.

Let us look at two examples.

In 1346 Edward III of England, marching into Normandy to fight the French, arranged his army in three corps; two in the front line and one in the rear. He gave to his eldest son, a boy of sixteen command of a front line corps and took himself command of the rear reserve. At a desperate moment in the battle, a member of the prince's retinue hurried to the rear to plead with the King to send help to his son. 'Is he dead' asked the King 'Or so mortally wounded that he can no longer take command.' 'No sire' replied the messenger. 'Go back then' said the King 'And do not send to me again while the boy

lives. I command them to let him win his spurs.' With 'terrible slaughter the battle was won. The Prince grew up to be a distinguished commander, and a wise statesman. Four hundred years later, Marie Angelique Arnauld a girl of eleven was made abbess of the convent of Port Royal by Paris. After six years of experience as abbess, Marie Angelique now aged 17, started out on a reform of the convent which was accepted by the community. She became the leader of one of the most significant religious movements of that time and that country.

Contemporary writers make clear that these two were not exceptional. Because the structure of society in many countries was still organic it appeared natural to adults to accept the leadership of adolescents of ability; as it became for the adolescents themselves to dedicate their utmost powers to gaining the objectives of a disciplined group, which accepted and valued them, as they, in their turn, valued the opportunities the group secured for them.

How different is the situation today!

We are afraid of our adolescents and being afraid, society neither welcomes their idealism nor makes room for their abilities. Untrained in living, the force within them drives them either into exacerbation of sexual urges, the one area where independent experiment is possible; into excesses of appearance or behaviour, into violent destructive action, or near worship of those few (for example the Beatles), who have fought their way from the ground up, against social norms, to a fantastic fame. Evidence for the view that it is not the biological state of adolescence, in itself, that turns potentially constructive energy into destructive licence, but the handling of adolescents by society, comes from those many adolescents, who, having the luck up in a group that respects them and a social structure that contains avenues of competitive and developing experiences, physical, intellectual, emotional, experimental and organization, develop into effective and satisfactory young adults.

What then can be done for adolescents caught in the 1966 situation? As I see it, this is a problem of human engineering. Power when not made use of, explodes. The responsibility is partly society's and partly the adolescent. How then is the situation to be tackled? For the therapist to whom the adolescent comes for help, a basic qualification is a vivid memory of his own adolescence and a sensitive awareness that, however disturbed a particular adolescent may appear to be, there is within him the germ of health. The task the therapist has to carry out is one which should be done by society as a whole for adolescents as a group.

The adolescent is adrift on a shoreless sea. He knows neither himself, nor anyone about him. The therapist's first task, in my view, is therefore to enable him to recognise himself, his specific abilities, his potentialities and his essential characteristics. How do his perceptions of the world reach him? by ear, eye, tactile sensation or what else? What

does he dream about as he sits in the tube or train? If he could choose to be someone else, who would this be? for what satisfaction does he most yearn? To discover the answers to these questions, tools are necessary which enable him to represent several aspects of an idea or emotion simultaneously, and through the use of which both the adolescent and the therapist come to see the shape of, as yet, undeveloped potentialities. Meanwhile the therapist explains to him the stresses he suffers from, and their absolute normality: opens out his concepts of life and its possibilities and makes contact for him with the satisfying aspects of normal living.

Adolescents can grow only through their own experiences and must be allowed to make their own experiments; their therapist aiding them to discover the grounds of their success or failure and by accepting these to come to respect their own individuality.

A basic knowledge of himself, when gained, gives the adolescent firm ground beneath his feet, from which to tackle his deeper conflicts, experienced now within a framework of achievement and on a basis of reality.

Monday afternoon 25<sup>th</sup> July, 1966.

Edinburgh.