

**“On the Verge”**  
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Young adults are getting older. Of course, we’re all getting older, but I’m talking about who gets classified as a young adult. The UUA now considers anyone between 18 and 35 a young adult. Robert Wuthnow, a highly respected sociologist of religion, now puts the age range at 21 to 45.

These upwardly revised age categories reflect a trend toward postponement of major life decisions, such as marrying and having children. In a book called After the Baby Boomers, Wuthnow attributes this to the environment of instability facing today’s young adults.

Reduced employment and financial security are significant sources of this. Ironically, so is the dramatic increase in the overall education level of young adults, because for many, higher education means staggering amounts of debt. Economic globalization also compounds employment insecurity and financial instability.

A subtler effect from globalization concerns its creation of a more fluid demography in urban areas, where the young adult population is concentrated. The pattern of relationships observable in young adults is looser than before, reflecting both greater mobility and greater capability for staying in touch over longer distances. This means a broad range of relating, at the expense of depth and continuity.

And then there is the culture of the information explosion. Everyone is affected by these technological advances – young adults too, only more so. Exponentially faster than ever, military invasions get launched, business decisions get made, prices get changed, plants get closed, production gets moved somewhere else, commercial winners win, commercial losers lose, the training needed for highly skilled jobs gets rewritten, stock and real estate markets go up and down like yoyos.

We negotiate life more by manipulating the symbols of things than by grasping the things themselves. The past recedes into real or perceived irrelevance faster than ever. The future is much harder to project from that receding past.

The insatiable appetite for speed pulls everything toward fluidity. Fluidity can mean responsiveness, but it can also create a sense that everything is constantly renegotiable. Things tend not to hang around long enough for us to know what they really are. You start asking yourself, if everything around me is this transient, is there anything lasting about me? In this throw-away society, am I also disposable?

Historically, religion has been a countervailing source of stability in uncertain times. But the latest study from the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, entitled “Faith in Flux,”

reports that changes in religious affiliation have been underestimated in previous studies. A large majority of those leaving their childhood religious affiliation are from the 35 and under demographic.

There is a natural impulse to want to help young adults adapt to this new fluidity. But as Heather's "from the heart testimony" so powerfully shows, learning how to be well-adjusted may be the last thing young adults need. I also hear this in Mary Oliver's poem urging her hypothetical listener to stop rowing. Don't take a class in how to row faster – stop rowing.

If we shouldn't be helping young adults adapt, what SHOULD we be doing to be supportive of them?

In 1902, a nineteen-year-old student named Franz Kappus was attending the Military Academy of Wiener Neustadt, in Austria. One day as he sat in the park near the Academy reading poetry, the chaplain of the school happened by. Glancing at Kappus' book, he remarked that the author, who was well on his way to becoming famous, had himself been a student at the Military Academy many years earlier. Struggling with his own private passion about becoming a poet, Kappus immediately sent some of his verse to this alumnus poet, asking for his judgment.

The much-admired, fast-rising poet was Rainer Maria Rilke, widely regarded as one of the greatest modern German poets. His correspondence with Franz Kappus eventually led to the publication of a book called Letters to a Young Poet, which has inspired countless young adults.

The very first thing Rilke did in his famous correspondence with young Kappus was refuse to judge his poems. "I cannot discuss your verses," he said, "for any attempt at criticism would be foreign to me. Nothing touches a work of art so little as words of criticism." Rather than help his correspondent adapt by learning to please the critics, he had the wise presumption to speak directly to the young poet's soul.

"You ask me whether your verses are any good," wrote Rilke. "You compare them with other poems, and you are upset when certain editors reject your work. Now . . . I beg you to stop doing that sort of thing. You are looking outside, and that is what you should most avoid right now. . . . There is only one thing you should do. Go into yourself. . . . "What is necessary," he said, "is only this: solitude, vast inner solitude. To walk inside yourself for hours and meet no one – that is what you must be able to attain." He saw solitude as the immutable reality of human life, beneath all the social veneer. This is evident even in the way he looked at love, which he described to young Kappus as "two solitudes protecting and bordering and greeting each other."

But Rilke was doing more than simply recommending solitude. That wouldn't have taken a six-year correspondence. He was saying to Kappus "I see you. I see in your letters and verses the distinctive character of a particular individual. I also see the place from which you see – the perspective of a young adult feeling pulled and pushed by so many social pressures and inner voices." Most importantly, Rilke saw a soul, a transpersonal something that holds both an astonishing stillness and a longing to break into the world.

Rilke was introducing Kappus to his own soul, an encounter that is transformative – a shift so profound that it changes not what we see but rather the very place from which we see.

After such a shift, the jangled world that Heather described in her testimony this morning is just the way it was before. But suddenly, seen from a deeper perspective, there are choices where before there was only inertia and inevitability. Suddenly there is an awareness that one's worth and one's life does not depend on all that stuff so many were chasing in 1902, were still chasing in 2002, and will always be pulled into chasing. The option presents itself of giving up the chase, dropping out of the rowing classes and resting on the oars for a time, in a place of no time, in solitude. A place where one might actually come face to face with oneself.

Why is this exploration of self in solitude the particular work of young adults? Is there some pathology abroad in our culture that strikes between the ages of 18 and 35 or 45 or whatever, for which young adults must find a cure? I don't think so. I think it is because they are on the verge of making a crucial transition in their relationship with authenticity. It is a transition that is part and parcel of the arc of human life – from an unconscious wholeness to a wounding experience of separation to a recovery of wholeness in the new and exhilarating form of an authentic life.

Here is what I mean by that arc of human life. We start out at one with mother, at one with the universe. We are part of the wholeness that is the void described in the Book of Genesis, the darkness preceding the light that makes separateness possible. We float in a sea of subjectivity, an amniotic illusion of central position. All needs satisfied, everything efficiently delivered . . . by womb service. (Take heart – one more week and this kind of humor will be over.)

Thrown into the world, we experience the shock of separation and feel the intense urge to do something about it – to restore stability and connection. Society, radiating outward from Mom and Dad, offers this – a kind of social womb that meets all needs through the umbilicus of culture. This leads to internalizing society's off-the-shelf constructs of identity, rather than cultivating the seed of authentic identity waiting within.

Mary Oliver was right to say that eventually, we all must row for our lives toward the rapids, toward the waterfall. We need to give ourselves to life unreservedly, but not before we have a self to give.

We cannot be authentic until we have an "aut" – Until we grow the aut seed within. "Aut" being the Greek word for "self." And that can't happen until a boundary is established between self and everything else, giving the nascent self the space – the solitude – to develop on its own. To be what Nietzsche called "ein aus sich rollendes rad" – a wheel rolling out of its own center.

"Authentic" means originating from the self – like that wheel. Authenticity is the experience of self as cause, rather than effect – the prime cause before all other causes and effects. This is what it means to be divine, what it means to say that there is a spark or seed of the divine inside every person. And right here, what looms into view is the connection between the

authenticity of humans and the authenticity of God. You may be surprised at the idea that God has authenticity issues, but hear me out.

God begins in solitude. God lets go of the star stuff that becomes us, and we fall to earth, into separation, into the apartness called mortal life. This is divinity as a wholeness or unity dividing itself into multiplicity – God on the one hand, and divinely sparked humans on the other. Until the pieces of this multiplicity recognize the divinity in one another, no one is fully seen or known, including God.

It is as if the young adulthoods of humans contain the young adulthood of God, who must be moving on an arc that is interdependent with the arc of human life. . . . I have now described God as a young adult with issues about authenticity. Hear me out.

I believe Rilke was pointing to this interdependence in a poem (R and B p. 236) that ends with these startling words: “take your well-disciplined strengths and stretch them between two opposing poles. Because inside humans is where God learns.” Inside humans is where God learns. What an exquisite scrambling of theism and humanism, making it marvelously impossible to praise one and condemn the other.

The strengths Rilke refers to are the robustness of a self cultivated in solitude. His first polarity is unconscious wholeness -- the void and darkness where Genesis begins, before light made separation and apartness possible. His second polarity is the wholeness toward which we all journey as spiritual seekers. This second wholeness is one in which separate, divinely sparked selves are "a part of" all with which they belong. But they can't be that until they have gone through being "apart from" all with which they belong. This is so because only in that apartness can something emerge as a distinct "part" -- a distinct self or "aut" to make authentic living possible.

The only way God learns self-knowledge is by seeing a reflection of God in humans as they claim their own authenticity, which is to say, their spark of divinity – making it first cause in their mortal lives. Imagine that: even God needs to be seen. Even God is on the verge of a transition in God's relation to authenticity, a kind of divine young adulthood. Even God is a kind of wanderer in the universe. Humanity represents God's divine yearning to be seen.

It isn't ordained, of course, that any particular human will successfully navigate this passage in his relation to authenticity. And if humans don't, God won't either, because inside humans is where God learns. You can turn away from this challenge. An experience of authenticity is a form of grace, and grace can always be refused. If it were mandatory, it wouldn't be grace, now would it.

The birthday boy in Yehuda Amichai's poem certainly hasn't navigated this passage, after 32 years. Unless something changes, the birthdays yet to come are likely to find him still standing alone in the vast desert, fumbling around with his outdated maps, without recommendations.

There is a piece of this birthday boy in us all, representing the unfinished business of young adulthood. We trundle this stuff along in front of us like a wheelbarrow, our hands manacled to its handles. It comes between us and other people. It is in play in any interaction like the one Rilke had with young Franz Kappus. Just as Rilke introduced him to his own soul, so did Kappus enable Rilke to reconnect with the troubled young man he was fifteen years earlier, when he spent a miserable few years in military school. Each holds up a mirror to the other. So don't think that elders engaging spiritually with young adults is some kind of charity. We older folks have much at stake in this encounter.

At my daughter's commencement ceremony last month, the college president ended his speech by looking at the graduates and saying, "We're counting on you." I winced at that, thinking "what right do we have to count on them, after the way we have let them down in our stewardship of the world?" But we do count you, young adults. We count on you to let yourselves be seen, to bring the gift of yourselves into the world, as your very imperfect elders needed to do, sometimes tried to do, and often failed to do. Some of us are struggling with it still, heading off into experiences of solitude at a terribly late date, still hoping to come face to face with ourselves there.

We count on you and on the young adults within ourselves, who also found themselves on the verge not so long ago and who still wait within us to be seen, to be healed. We and you have so much to talk about, so much to learn. So much bordering and protecting and greeting one another to do on our common journey toward an authentic wholeness.

AMEN.