

**“The Vanishing American Adult”
Our Coming-of-Age Crisis--and How to Rebuild a Culture of
Self-Reliance**

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Kindle notes by Dave Kraft

I believe our entire nation is in the midst of a collective coming-of-age crisis without parallel in our history. We are living in an America of perpetual adolescence.

What is happening is about not having much experience or interest in seeing tasks through to completion; students’ limited experience with hard work screen time being addictive and changing kids’ brains. Parents notice that all of this screen time seems to imbue their kids with a zombie-like passivity; a decline of agency, of initiative, of liveliness.

What magic moment after age 14 will lead them to suddenly switch from passivity to the responsibility-taking of adulthood? How do we awaken an aspiration to self-disciplined independence lack of initiative and about the coddling that breeds softness and entitlement, in kids from age ten to twenty-something; confirming our natural inclinations to read things that confirm our beliefs rather than challenge them. They know that almost all of our kids seem to be distracted and drifting. The thought of them drifting in a state of passive, dependent, perpetual adolescence turns our stomachs.

The following six broad themes to focus on:

1. Overcome peer culture
2. Work hard
3. Resist consumption
4. Consumption is not the key to happiness; production is
5. Travel to experience the difference between “need” and “want”
6. Become truly literate

Our goal is for our kids to be intentional about everything they do—to reject passivity and mindless consumption and to embrace an ethos of action, of productivity, of meaningful work, of genuinely lifelong learning. In other words, we want them to find the good life. The word “adolescence,” derived from the Latin verb meaning “to grow up;” adult independence rather than childhood dependency. Endless adolescence, however, is bizarrely oxymoronic.

Parenting is hard, and it feels like a marathon-long wrestling match, because all human beings are born with a will that is, in fact, unruly. John Dewey has, in my view, the single best claim to be the father of the modern American public high school.

Even if you share his progressive goals down to the last one, he is responsible for allowing schools to undermine how Americans once turned children into adults. I worry deeply about my children's character—I want them to struggle mightily against the self-absorbed, adamic yearning for forbidden fruit. Thus serious adults have long guided their children to prioritize the weighty over the trivial as they transition to becoming young adults. Work instability will become an even more regular feature of future experience.

For most of U.S. history, the basic assumption has been that kids were born to work. In this frontier nation, literacy was prized, but long schooling was scarce. American children would be given meaningful tasks to accomplish and they thus matured early out of necessity, as formalized public education spread and more Americans began to adopt the wealthy European model of protecting children from work instead of socializing them into work. They certainly did not presume that the classrooms of secondary education were the sole route to maturation and a middle-class lifestyle.

Let's limit ourselves to brief summaries of some indicative changes of our less intentional approach to shaping our offspring as they come of age.

More Medication. We lack the data to make a fully informed judgment. They and their parents are turning to drugs to cope—producing the most medicated generation of youth in history.

More Screen Time. Kids over 13 are spending nearly two-thirds of their waking hours with their eyes tied down and bodies stationary. More and more young American men are opting out of higher education, work, and marriage in favor of electronic amusements. A staggering 5 million Americans—more than the combined populations of Nebraska, South Dakota, North Dakota, Wyoming, and Montana—consume forty-five hours of video games per week.

More Pornography.

A Barna survey found that 63 percent of men age 18 to 30 view pornography more than once per week.

More Years under Mom's roof.

The increasing habit of 18-year-olds to early thirty-somethings to remain dependent or to return home is caused mainly by decreasing initiative, the absence of economic alternatives, and a deficit of the life skills required for self-reliance. Fully one-quarter of Americans between age 25 and 29 now live with a parent—compared millennials are also increasingly likely to “boomerang” back home after failing in school, losing a job, or having a bad breakup.

The Washington Post reported in 2016 that the percentage of young men who are unmarried and living at home is now higher than at any point since the 1800s. Take a moment to think about that.

Less Religious Participation

Christian Smith and a team of Notre Dame sociologists are finding that an individualistic sense of religion and local community tends to bleed over into a highly individualistic understanding of right and wrong. Among our young, nearly half now profess an indifference even to whether they live in a democracy.

More Intellectually Fragile.

This grooming not to speak about hard or controversial matters—instead of speaking, and being challenged, and debating, and revising—is almost the exact opposite of what productivity in the coming workplace will demand.

Softer Parenting.

It should come as no surprise that the kids have only the vaguest idea of how to make decisions for themselves. Who Birthed Softer Parenting? Over the last century and a half, the gritty parenting of early America has gradually given way to a more nurturing approach. Most of us radically understate the degree to which visual media—first television, now everything—eroded thoughtful childhood.

In the face of unprecedented prosperity and freedom from convention, the generation coming of age is stuck in a hazy, extended adolescence, never allowed simply to be children, and yet also rarely nudged to be fully adult. The more affluent the society, the more likely young people will experience an extended drift toward adulthood, making it easier for their teens to avoid the rigors and responsibilities of becoming a grown-up.

Kathleen Shaputis painfully labels millennials “The Peter Pan Generation” and “the Boomerang Generation” for their reluctance to become independent and for their tendency to rush back home after trial runs of venturing out. Lowering expectations, cushioning all blows, and tolerating aimlessness not only hurts them, it also deprives their neighbors. I believe in as much decentralized decision-making as conceivably feasible. To reiterate: nearly a quintupling of federal spending over thirty years produced nothing quantifiably better.

John Dewey started the idea that the school was no longer there to support parents, but to replace them. The problem with all of this is that it again assumes without questioning that education can be reduced to schooling—that they are synonyms.

School can't possibly solve every societal problem, so we need to know precisely what we're expecting from our schools. Our “young people are indifferent to the adult world and to the future; indifferent to almost everything except the diversion of toys and

violence. We need to ask what the purpose of education is, and what portion of that purpose can reasonably be accomplished by formalized schooling? Polling shows that tens of millions of American parents consistently worry that we are churning out indifferent, distracted, passive, dependent young adults.

I take issue with the notion that young adults are incapable of making choices or acting independently. It is clearly true that they aren't very good at it, but that is because we failed to help them learn how to seize the reins and do it themselves much earlier—in primary and middle school. Education that focuses on tools and techniques at the exclusion of the student's role in directing his or her own learning is destined to fail. It is almost impossible to educate someone with an answer until he or she is invested in asking a question. National greatness will not be recovered via a mindless expansion of bureaucratized schooling.

The sole true end of education is simply this: to teach men and women how to learn for themselves; and whatever instruction fails to do this is effort spent in vain.” What tasks are we parents and guides doing for our kids now that we want to help them learn to do well, but without our hand-holding? While the absence of particular tasks is individually a happy development, the overall absence of meaningful, character-building, household-centered tasks is not.

First, discover the body—its potential and its frailty, and the many diverse stages of life that lie ahead—by breaking free of the tyranny of one generation.

Second, develop a work ethic.

Third, embrace limited consumption. At some point we forgot the difference between needs and wants and decided that acquiring things could bring us happiness.

Fourth, learn how to travel and to travel light.

Fifth, learn how to read and decide what to read. We tend to focus on our children's lack of motivation to work, but at least as large a hurdle to developing a work ethic is their simple lack of exposure to different kinds of work.

Alice Schlegel has studied 186 preindustrial cultures and found that age segregation is closely correlated to “antisocial behavior and to socialization for competitiveness and aggressiveness.” The American Society of Plastic Surgeons reports that Americans spent a record \$13.5 billion on cosmetic procedures in 2015. We latch onto evidence hinting that aging can be put off, perhaps indefinitely. It's no surprise then that our young today inherit a fear of growing up and growing old, and a near allergy to confronting honestly the only certainty in life besides taxes.

Why embrace suffering when we have drugs and other means at our disposal to eliminate it? Because suffering will never truly be avoided.

Some of the most productive people in history were prodigious nappers. Winston Churchill is legendary for his tireless work ethic. He kept long hours well into the night his whole life, but especially during the Second World War. He drew much of his energy from regular naps. You will be able to accomplish more” if you nap and then return to working. One of the markers of a disciplined and an adult life is the learned skill to live in the moment when things are good and to turn to hope or pleasant nostalgia when the present is bumpy.

There is almost nothing more important we can do for our young than convince them that production is more satisfying than consumption. To find freedom in your work, rather than freedom from your work, even when work hurts. Many of the teens I met upon arriving on campus also had an outsized sense of entitlement without any corresponding notion of accountability.

The survey takeaway that repeatedly woke me in the middle of the night was the aching sense not just that the students lacked a work ethic, but more fundamentally that they lacked an experiential understanding of the difference between production and consumption.

Students overwhelmingly highlighted their desire for freedom from responsibilities. And these students, I learned from interviewing many of them, had mostly not done any hard work prior to arriving in college. As one New York Times story about millennials in the workplace put it, managers struggle with their young employees’ “sense of entitlement, a tendency to overshare on social media, and frankness verging on insubordination.”

As people sense that the products of their work and the process of working are being devalued, they often understandably drift toward a sensibility of merely “working for the weekend.” It is dangerous to begin believing that the loving act is to insulate our offspring from work rather than planning for the bumpy and unglamorous tasks of teaching them how to work hard.

F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote his daughter, Scottie: “Nothing any good isn’t hard.” Roosevelt believed that the worker who put his play over his work could simply not be a good American. Puritans were zealous about recreation as well—but they intentionally distinguished between “recreation” and “leisure.” The latter tries to become the center of life; whereas the former is an exercise or escape used to restore people—to refresh and “re-create” them—so that they can get back to being productive for the glory of God and the good of their neighbor. “Vocation.” The word comes from the Latin vox, meaning “voice”—as in something God “calls” you to do. So much of modern American life seems to be about finding more efficient ways of shirking responsibilities.

American teens hear plenty about their rights but correspondingly little about their duties. As a core part of our calling as parents—aim not to coddle them but to see them toughened up. Neither our children nor your children will grow up to be free, independent, self-respecting adults if we hand them everything without the expectation of something in return.

In a culture with many problems, it felt like transmitting the work ethic was darn near the top of most parents' and grandparents' lists of concerns. They want them to become curious and service-minded. They want them to not be afraid of hard work. In effect, the laws exist to do everything possible to prevent 15-, 16-, and 17-year-olds from working,

The older American ethic—of teaching kids why good work rather than the absence of work will make them happy—must be recovered in order to serve our kids better. As a result, they breathe the air of a culture that has transformed what used to be “wants” into norms and therefore “needs.” It’s a call to reemphasize core American traits—self-denial and deferred gratification—that will stand all of us well in the years to come.

Over the past decade Arthur Brooks has culled thousands of studies on what makes for a happy life, distilling the findings into a few basic precepts that can help us explain to our kids why consumption isn’t a road to happiness. These are the central variables that emerge from Brooks’s research:

Faith: Do you have a framework to make sense of death and suffering?

Family: Do you have a home life with mutual affection, where the good of others is as important to you as your own happiness?

Community: Do you have at least two real friends who feel pain when you suffer and share joy when you thrive?

Work: Perhaps most fundamentally, when you leave home on Monday morning, do you believe that there are other people who genuinely benefit from the work you do? Is your calling meaningful? Not: “Is it fun or well-compensated,” but rather, “Does it matter?” Data also suggests that the least happy people are lottery winners and folks with inherited money but no meaningful jobs.

But even so, the main thrust of his writing affirms the centrality of meaningful relationships and important causes to achieving happiness. Brooks: The “deep truth” is that “work, not money, is the fundamental source of our dignity. What about the concept of deferred gratification?”

We live in a culture that has abandoned older attitudes toward and practices of limited consumption. It is easy to see why some of us might have begun to confuse wants with needs and to mistake convenience and necessity. We need to recover a little perspective on what “need” has almost always looked like if we are going to give our kids any chance of transcending entitlement attitudes and learning to live gratefully.

The less we are able to satisfy our private passions, the more we must abandon ourselves to those of a general nature.” More stuff is an insufficient salve for feelings of isolation. Being subconsciously insulated from necessity and transforming more wants into needs hasn’t made us happier. We have become a generation drifting into adulthood that has been reared with an entitled and false sense of both how much material comfort we need, and how easily it should come to us. If you desire things beyond your control, you are bound to be unfortunate” and disappointed.

And the core lesson Rousseau wrongly wants to teach first is freedom from man-made constraints, prejudices, and social pressure. Living the good life doesn’t require the budding adult to live without goods, without things, without stuff. But a truly good life is incompatible with a dependency on such things. We believe you’re most fully alive when you distill things to the essentials of life—and then learn the habit of finding great pleasure and great gratitude in those essentials. Anyone who swims so completely in a sea of material surplus as to be unaware of the virtues of the simple life is flirting with great moral risk. Reaffirm the older American traits of self-denial and deferred gratification.

What is key, though, in terms of making travel a formative experience for your kids, is to put them into situations where they are out of their comfort zone and seeing things they don’t ordinarily see. There’s nothing like a few miles—or a few hundred, or a few thousand—to help you gain some perspective on what’s really important.

To live deliberately is to live with intent, to use your brain, to take nothing for granted, and to decide what is necessary for living and what isn’t. Thoughtful travel is an obligatory part of education because travel “is fatal to prejudice, bigotry and narrow-mindedness, and many of our people need it sorely on these accounts.”

We are trying to help adolescent eyes focus for the first time on the sea of assumptions in which they swim at home. Reading done well is not a passive activity like sitting in front of a screen. It requires a degree of attention, engagement, and active questioning of which most of our children currently have a deficit.

At our house we challenge ourselves to read for sixty minutes without looking at smartphones, televisions, or computers. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the average American now reads only nineteen minutes per day. Life isn’t about freedom from constraint. Life is about the freedom to act courageously within limits. Any education in freedom demands a thorough understanding of freedom’s enemies. The newfound popularity of socialism among millennials is an alarming trend.

In an age when appeals to science are intended to shut down debate rather than spur further questioning. We can only add and subtract from our lists once there are trial lists from which to add and subtract. The most important thing is to read early and often, and impart that habit to your children, too.

The truly free have always required literacy. For the watchfulness—and thoughtfulness—of fully formed adults is the only lasting guardian of liberty. I have concerns about some trends: accelerating technologies, the coming-of-age crisis, quick fixes, nativist campaigns, and more centralized power as a way out. A plea for self-discipline and self-control is the one and only dignified alternative to discipline and control from without.

Sadly, the United States today suffers from widespread collective amnesia. As a result, many Americans coming of age today don't understand the country they're inheriting. They've not heard our story. And thus many of them don't even know what they don't know.

What's happening now in this country is that we're reaping the fruits of the last fifty years of ceasing to talk in a meaningful, public way about what unites us—about what the American experiment was attempting, why it was and is extraordinary, and the challenges we must perpetually rise to if we're going to remain Americans.

Bizarrely, the protests that have erupted over the past two years at colleges and universities that charge more than a quarter of a million dollars for an “education” have been explicit in their demands for protection from new and uncomfortable ideas; the troubling turn from freedom of expression and academic freedom toward political correctness and speech codes on our elite campuses. The government exists to serve the people, not the other way around.

The people are primary and the government is derivative, not the other way around. The Constitution was written to limit what government can do—and thus to establish clearly what it cannot do. The First Amendment became, by design, a giant laundry list of guarantees: the freedom of religion and the freedom of speech and the freedom of assembly and the freedom of the press and the right of redress and grievance.

We do not want more timid souls who drift through their teens and twenties in a state of numb, passive, dependent, perpetual adolescence. There is a crisis of vision in creating lifelong learners. Necessity is the mother of invention. At the end of the day, the challenge before us is to create lifelong learners and lifelong producers. Here is the truth: nobody owes you anything. In this life we get nothing except through effort and hard work.