

# Beyond Adolescence

## The Human Species Faces Growing Up

*John Renesch*

For many years, I have been polling audiences around the world about where they think human beings are in our evolution. Are we still in childhood? Adolescence? How about young adult? Or maybe mature adult or elder? Usually I do this before my speech, and the result is always the same. Eighty to ninety percent of the people think we are in adolescence. Rarely do I see any hands raised for adult, young or mature.

My colleague Duane Elgin—author of *The Living Universe* and other books—has been doing similar polling for many years, and he reports very similar responses from his audiences.<sup>1</sup> Based on our polls, we believe that most people think we are yet to fully mature as a species, and this opinion transcends national boundaries. The fact that we humans haven't yet fully matured isn't much of a secret.

We don't have much conscious choice when it comes to physical maturing. It happens without our will, a natural phenomenon of growing older from childhood through pubescence. Emotional and intellectual maturity is another matter. While some people mature emotionally and intellectually, many don't. For instance, we know addicts of all kinds often cease maturing emotionally around the age

---

**John Renesch** is a businessman-turned-futurist. He is the author of *Getting to the Better Future: A Matter of Conscious Choosing* (New Business Communications, 2000) and *The Great Growing Up* (forthcoming). E-mail at [john@renesch.com](mailto:john@renesch.com).

they start their addiction. After they get sober, they have to deal with this arrested emotional development.

A distinction I like to make is that, while *physical* maturing happens automatically, we have to choose to grow up *intellectually* and *emotionally*, nudged forward by life and the situations that life delivers to us. This takes conscious effort. It takes intentionality. Some of us mature in these areas more than others.

If we look at the world's most pressing problems as the consequence of adolescent behavior, we might better understand why we have them. Like teenagers, we tend to think short term and avoid longer-term solutions. We seek immediate gratification; what we want, we want *now*, as soon as possible. We like hanging out with people like us—our peers—where we “fit in.” People who are different are shunned, bullied, or vilified. We tend to think in absolutes, with little tolerance for nuance and subtlety. We love to play games and enjoy gadgets—even if we prefer to think of them as “grown-up toys.” These are all familiar behaviors to the parent of a teenager in today's world.

The major global concerns—unsustainable lifestyles, social injustice, unfettered population growth, ideology wars, air and water pollution, etc.—and the many failed attempts to mitigate or provide long-term solutions to these challenges, suggest that adolescent attitudes and behavior are dominant in today's world. Mature approaches to our problems seem rare or nonexistent.

Recently, there were calls for “adult conversations” in Washington among U.S. politicians, implying that mature dialogue was generally unavailable. By observing the legislative gridlock and partisan bickering so prevalent in the U.S. Capitol, the comparison to childishness or adolescent “acting out” is easy to make.

Of course, calling for our species to grow up is empty rhetoric unless there is some commitment to do so from a large segment of the population. This could be a huge opportunity for new leadership to assert itself, not in the personhood of one heroic personality but in a collaborative movement launched by people in many sectors—cor-

porate, academia, government, NGOs—acting in unison to delegitimize the prevailing behaviors and attitudes that keep us stuck in our adolescent dysfunction.

This leap in our evolution means a major paradigm shift in how we think and act, a shift in human consciousness—a leap to a more sustainable, socially just, and fulfilling human presence on this planet. This will require full-blown adult thinking and feeling. Not only must we choose it, but we must also rally our fellow global citizens to choose it as well. Once chosen, the first step is to end the legitimization of the many habits and practices that contribute to our present dysfunctions. This will mean changing much of the infrastructure we have come to depend upon.

To start, each of us needs to do some soul searching, telling the truth about our own adolescent indulgences and consolations—the payoffs that feed our immature egos, pandering to our insatiable desires for pleasure.

### THE CAIRO EFFECT

Changing attitudes and behaviors on the scale we are talking about here will require leadership of unprecedented scope in all dimensions—depth of consciousness as well as breadth of population. In other words, we need to rise to the occasion in huge numbers and with unprecedented levels of responsibility. We saw a recent model of such an uprising in the 19 days during which the Egyptians took a stand for their country and won an opportunity to achieve freedom. Courage of conviction, commitment to peaceful revolution, and responsibility for their own community in Cairo's Tahrir Square were just a few of the characteristics demonstrated by hundreds of thousands of people intent on bringing about positive change for themselves.

Taking this intent and commitment to a global scale could lead all of humankind into global adulthood. This will require ordinary people making adult choices over adolescent ones, and taking unprec-

edented responsibility for clearing up the messes we have made in years past. This is not a job we delegate to our political leaders, or hope someone else will take on. This is a time when each one of us gets into action like the demonstrators in Tahrir Square. They stopped watching the events on TV or listening to the radio and got out of their houses. They joined the crowd and helped write history. They were willing to take a risk for something they believed in, like the founders of the United States, the followers of Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. who were committed to nonviolence, and the citizens of West Berlin who tore down the Berlin Wall.

### THE POWER OF LEGITIMACY

Social scientist and futurist Willis Harman addressed the issue of legitimacy and further explained the enormous power we wield as members of the society that bestows this legitimacy. He pointed to several profound transformations in history—the transition from the Roman Empire to Medieval Europe, from the Middle Ages to modern times, the creation of modern democracies, and the termination of slavery as an accepted institution. No matter how powerful the economic, political, or even military institution, he argued, it persisted because it had legitimacy, and that legitimacy came from the people.

Harman's main point was that people give legitimacy and they can take it away. Any challenge to the established legitimacy is likely to be the most powerful force for change to be found in history.

William James reminded us that we have to live today by what truth we can get *today* and be ready to call it falsehood *tomorrow*. History is filled with examples of yesterday's truths turning into tomorrow's falsehoods, and there's no reason to doubt that today's truths—those ideas that we currently grant legitimacy—will become unacceptable tomorrow. All we need to do is remove the legitimacy we give to our ideas of how things have to be.

Many people insist on having tools, methodologies, or techniques for action before they will allow themselves to entertain big

ideas. They want to see how it will work out *before* they choose to play. This is looking for a guarantee—another adolescent quality. There's no courage in playing it safe, and it certainly doesn't open the way for real transformation.

The founders of the United States weren't playing it safe when they committed themselves to establishing a nation predicated on self-evident truths and inalienable rights. They made monarchy illegitimate and invented a new form of governance. This had not been done before, and it certainly wasn't safe. There were no guarantees assuring them they'd succeed in their stand, their commitment, and their risk. But they knew they were on to something important, a unique opportunity to create something exciting, something wanted by all people who yearned for inner and outer freedom.

### CONSCIOUS EVOLUTION: THE NEW GREAT DREAM

It is time to stop thinking about what *might* happen in the future and start thinking about what we *want* to happen, about what needs to occur *now* to bring about that desired future.

This is "conscious evolution." Many find this term to be an oxymoron, because evolution is thought of as survival of the fittest, something left to chance and random circumstances. But as we evolve as human beings, we are also growing in consciousness, and we have more choice in how we evolve. Being conscious of the choice makes evolution self-transcendent. We can choose to take a stand and grow toward a desired future, or we can passively accept whatever future unfolds. We can evolve either on purpose or by accident. It is our choice.

Not making a choice is still making a choice. Choosing not to do something is nonetheless a choice—a choice that often legitimizes and empowers the very dysfunction that one opposes intellectually.

Mystics, poets, songwriters, and philosophers address matters of meaning, longing, and other intangible yearnings behind the passions that help us wake up every day, motivate us to get out of bed,

and move us to stand for something. These are the meaningful things that motivate us to be good parents, great performers, reliable workers, faithful partners, and, in general, a unique species that wants to explore and expand into something beyond our awareness, even if it is unexplainable or ineffable. There is always a “new” frontier for us. I propose it is the “great dream.”

This new Great Dream can be an expansion of the original American Dream—everyone created equal having inalienable rights, etc. It is certainly a challenge, but we in the United States love challenges: We’ve proven that over our short history. We are still learning and growing, finding our way along this difficult path to our original vision. We keep getting lost, then find our way back, and then we wander off that path again. Life without challenges can be pretty boring, so let’s expand the vision and embrace the challenges, even if this means we have to change, grow, and evolve to have the kind of future we claim to want.

If we want a world that works better, a world of responsible human beings living harmoniously with each other and the planet, we have to take a chance—and act! We need to shed the patina of cynicism and revive that idealism that once inspired us and fueled our passions in our youth. We need to stop playing it safe, avoiding making waves, and restricting our wishes for a better world to sentimental greeting cards. We need to stop numbing ourselves to the pains of living in the world today. We can do this by cutting back on habits that help us avoid feeling empathy for our fellow human beings, taking a risk like the Egyptians in Tahrir Square, and standing for what we want instead of merely opposing this or that. As the colloquialism goes, we need “to put some skin in the game.”

Then, without wearing any of our emotional armor, we can take responsibility for creating what we claim to want—a world that works for all, a world where liberty and justice for all prevails, a world in which we relate to one another and our planet with dignity and respect. None of us can do this alone. It will require that we act together

to pull it off. The important thing to remember is that it *can* be done.

**NOTE**

1. View Duane Elgin's video on his audience polling, "Is Humanity Growing Up?" [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TDfm3\\_5i0Uk](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TDfm3_5i0Uk).

