

Dare to Rethink: An Essay on Intergenerational Collaboration

*Captured by Anne de Wild and Chris Burke
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Dull meets Naïve

“Kids these days...” Adults have often bemoaned the tendencies of young people to challenge authority, relate to each other in unconventional ways, and question whether things could be better than they are. “...they don’t know how good they have it!”

It might be surprising to learn just how long these sentiments have been floating around. Here are just a few examples that we gathered:

“Young men have strong passions, and tend to gratify them indiscriminately... They are changeable and fickle in their desires... They have exalted notions, because they have not yet been humbled by life or learnt its necessary limitations... They think they know everything, and are always quite sure about it; this, in fact, is why they overdo everything.” (Aristotle, ‘Rhetoric’, 350 BC)

“Our young men have grown slothful. Their talents are left idle, and there is not a single honorable occupation for which they will toil day and night. Slumber and languor, and an interest in evil which is worse than slumber and languor, have entered into men’s hearts.” (Seneca the Elder, 54 BC – 39 AD)

“The perception has been made that among the school youth the decency and moral manners that were previously announced disappear more and more.” (Government Report, Germany, 1852)

If adults have had these thoughts for so long, it seems that the youth must really be like that! Is this so, and what actually happens in human development during the years of youth?

The development of the human being in the first seven years is focused on building up the physical body that will hold the space during their lifetime. Children are attuned to the rhythms of life and learn through imitation. In the second seven years, time comes into consciousness with the freeing of etheric forces, and formal schooling begins. Here, learning happens through experience and trying out different possibilities. In the third seven years, the astral body becomes the focal point of development. The astral body is the seat of our consciousness and our capacity to experience pleasure, pain, emotions, and other sensations. The capacity for intellectual reasoning awakens, along with a corresponding questioning of authority and convention.

When adults look at the youth, a pitying commentary can easily arise: “Yes, we were also young and foolish once! When you are as old as we are, then you will realize that your idealism and new ideas were just flights of fancy. Things are the way they are for good reasons!”

Dull meets naïve! The old ones have become dull because they have lost their own path, and the young ones who are blocked from going their own way become naïve.

The Will to Want - The Will to Act

Does it have to be this way, or is it time to finally change our perspective and see the youth (adolescents and young adults) for what they really are?

In biography and social art work, we connect the planets to the phases of development. Certain qualities have been ascribed to planets for centuries, and these represent soul qualities that live in each of us and express themselves in our thoughts, feelings, and actions. However, certain planetary qualities are more apparent during certain phases of life. Venus is the planet that has its main influence in the adolescent and early adult years (14-21 years). Mars comes into focus from about the age of 42 years. In between lie the Sun years, where (according to an anthroposophical perspective) the sentient soul, the intellectual-mind soul, and the consciousness soul are imbued with individuality. So in the Mars years, for the first time, a planet from the time before the Sun years (Moon, Mercury, Venus) meets a planet from after the Sun years (Mars, Jupiter, Saturn).

The youth years, under the auspices of Venus, are years of great creative power. Individuals open completely to their feelings and have to discover and acquire their capacity for judgment during this time. We know that Venus is a goddess representing the ideal of femininity, and this opening gesture and focus on ideals of the Venus years fit that picture. We could say that questions – Why? Why not? How could things be better? – have a feminine quality, in that they preserve openness and possibility in the matter at hand. Questioning the status quo – within their families, schools, and the broader world – is a characteristic feature of the youth. They bring questions into consciousness and insist that others confront them. We could call this orientation *the will to want*.

These Venus years are opposed to all the planets beyond the Sun years, but with Mars they have a special relationship. The forces in the Mars years (42-49 years) are quite marked by *the will to act*. Mars – the masculine counterpart to Venus and the Roman god of war – is decisive and action-oriented. He is tired of deliberating and building up capacities. He knows how the world works and how to get things done. He has the answers, and he wants to see results.

The negative view of the youth that has been held by adults for so long can be seen in this opposition between the will to want and the will to act. The idealism and unbridled possibility in the Venus years and the harsh “reality check” of Mars. (It’s worth pointing out that many parents are in their Mars years when their children are in their Venus years.)

On the other hand, one could also think that this greatest distance from each other can provide a greater possibility for a real encounter. From a distance, one can see a wholeness that is not visible from close up.

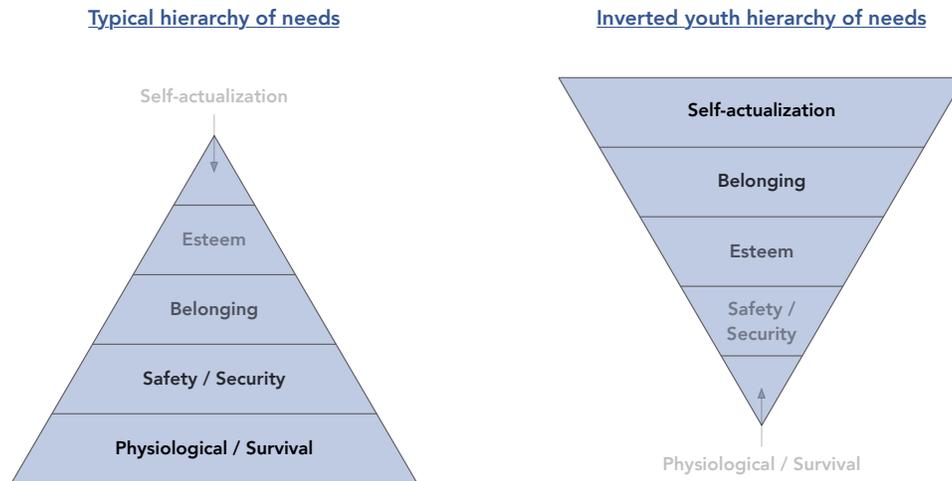
Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs – A Youthful Inversion

We can use Maslow’s hierarchy of needs to see how the youth are in relationship to older adults. In its typical form, basic survival needs are the most demanding of attention, followed by needs for safety and security, belonging (social inclusion), and esteem (social value). At the top is self-actualization, which means striving toward one’s unique potential. This order may feel right to the elder, although Paul Chappell has argued convincingly that people have a variety of nonphysical needs that can be more important than safety and security for people.

If we look at the youth, however, we can immediately see that the ordering must be different. For one thing, they are often willing to risk safety and security in the service of other needs, such as the need to belong (fit into a peer group), the need for esteem (achieving status within a peer group), and self-actualization (establishing a unique and authentic identity). Young people are also sometimes willing to risk safety and security for higher purposes – for

what they see as righteous causes. Picture the young people who volunteer to serve in the military, or the young people who staged nonviolent protests during the civil rights movement, or the young people today who are taking a stand for what they believe in. Call them naïve, call them idealistic, but they have made it clear that conventions and excuses and threats are not going to stop them from asking for more from each other and from the adults in power.

Viewed in this way, it seems that the youth may be working with an inverted pyramid, prioritizing the “higher-order” needs and risking the “lower-order” needs to serve them. In contrast, their elders weigh the physiological and safety/security needs more heavily, leading them to a more gradual and strategic orientation toward risk-taking and pursuing higher purposes.



Youth as a Living Past to the Elders - Elders as a Living Future to the Youth

People are fond of saying, “Children are our future,” but young people are also a living reminder of our own youthful past – our “living past.” We old folks have all been young in our lives and hopefully have experienced the burning fire and enthusiasm of those years. We probably had to struggle with setbacks and disillusionment as we got older, we became familiar with “how the world works,” and at some point maybe we finally gave up. But if the idea that the youth are our living past is true, then working with young people could help us to rekindle the fires of our own youth. They can remind us that we have also dreamed of a better world than the one we inherited, and they can make us more keenly aware of the ways in which we are preparing the world that we will hand off to them. They can prompt us to re-evaluate what we previously dismissed as unrealistic fantasy – including our own fantasies about who we might become. What would happen if everyone suddenly believed their dreams were possible?

We should also acknowledge that in this relationship, the elders are the living future of the youth. Just as younger children naturally imitate their parents and caretakers and pretend to be grown up, so do adolescents and young adults look into the world of grownups for role models – people who they can aspire to be like as they age. When they look into the world and see elders who are complacent, defeated, selfish, and cynical, their youthful frustration can turn into a sense of resignation or inevitability as they move through the Sun years. However, when they can see strong examples of elders who have never stopped believing in and working toward their ideals, then their own idealism can be buoyed as they meet the hurdles that life will throw in their way.

Speaking of the relationship between youth and age, Rudolf Steiner had this to say:

“A young human being is the carrier of a young physical body. This body will become older with time. At the same time a young human being is also connected to the etheric body who is the oldest at birth and will become younger during the time. Sitting with young people means that there is an etheric part old and "wise" too. And the older person can wonder with "young" etheric forces what the wise one has to say. How perfect it is, to be young and old at the same time in different ways.” (GA 159, Elberfeld, 13 June 1915)

Innovation AND Tradition - Intergenerational Collaboration

The potential of youth, as we have already mentioned, is this great, urgent fire and idealism. They develop a critical mind and dare to offer solutions to our present problems. They have not yet become jaded by bureaucratic hurdles, or at least they are not willing to let such hurdles interfere with their vision. They are still open and therefore can easily get excited about big questions, and they maybe still have an intuitive (albeit hazy) connection to the spiritual world.

The potential of the elder is their experience and their resources, which are still inaccessible to the young. We elders have tools and a network that we have built up over the past 20 to 40 years or more. We have learned to successfully navigate the bureaucratic machinery to get things done. We've built up social and financial capital that we can invest in ideas we believe in. Perhaps we've even learned that collaboration takes more time, but it can be worth it if it means broader buy-in for the project.

What would be possible if the elders offered the youth access to their wisdom, resources, tools, and network? What would be necessary to make it happen? First of all, the elders must become aware of their *responsibility* as the living future of the young to model what it looks like to age well. In considering this new responsibility, how many of us can really seriously be regarded as role models to the young? We stand there, as with two full buckets of tools and resources, and we barely move. To the urgent youth, we refuse access to our buckets because we don't want to risk what we've amassed on untested ideas. We remain still, because then we feel safe. How many of us will still be clutching our brimming buckets in our final hours? This is an extinct tradition, one that still conveys the feeling of security, but does not transmit fire anymore, but rather the ashes. The structure holds, as long as nothing new shakes it.

The youth brings the counterpart – the innovation. Every idea can be considered, new approaches and solutions are possible, conventional impediments can be called out for their absurdity, and they are not afraid. On the contrary, they kindle new fire.

What would the present look like if tradition and innovation were brought together to address the major problems that threaten society and the world today, such as climate change, social isolation, unequal resource allocation, educational inequality, and digitalization and artificial intelligence?

Young people, like the survivors of the Parkland school shooting, tackle topics such as gun control and demand action with a loud voice. Greta Thunberg has launched a major movement on climate change with her action. Boyan Slat, a Dutch student, has committed himself to freeing the oceans from plastic. And Malala Yousafzai is on a crusade to expand educational access to girls, even after being shot and nearly killed for her advocacy. Young people around the world are pushing their ideas into our field of view, and that is absolutely necessary.

For where Two or Three are Gathered Together in My Name...

Isn't it time to indulge ourselves in this new thought? And do we have the courage to let old ideas and points of view die, while accepting the fear of becoming that helps us open up to innovation with sincerity?

By working together and taking all age groups seriously, we immediately satisfy the basic needs of human beings: to be heard, to do meaningful things, and to be a valued part of a community. The young ones can develop confidence in the future, and the elders can take on a new leadership role. They can provide the framework and resources for innovation, and intervene only when necessary. By dealing with their living past in the youth, burdens and outdated structures can be cast off, and they can rejuvenate inwardly as their bodies get older.

Both sides (and everyone in between) have to dare to take a step towards each other. But just this kind of risk is needed to realize the potential of true intergenerational collaboration, which can make people grow beyond themselves and start working together to address the issues that affect everyone. This kind of collaboration can happen when people can see each other as striving human beings who have gifts to offer that they themselves lack. With that perspective, a genuine encounter becomes possible out of which can arise what must arise. What this *something* is must be revealed in the encounter, because only there lies the truth to be grasped.

Both the young and the old must leave their safe havens for the sake of encounter. This is the necessary gesture of the Consciousness Soul Age – which is our living PRESENT.