

Soaring in your Twenties: Live and Love with Passion and Engagement

(Dedicated to Misha and Natalie)

By Alan Karbelnig, PhD, ABPP

Whether terrified, furious, jealous or lost, you twenty-somethings face two basic and ancient developmental tasks: finding identity and finding love. You live in such a bizarre age! Never before in the history of humanity have you, or all persons for that matter, been so brutally assaulted by the mass media. Cable and network television, satellite radio, social media, the internet, billboards – to name but a few – infect you every minute of every day. They enter your minds like syphilitic spirochetes influencing every element of your being, from how you feel to how you think, from your visions of yourselves to your images of others.

And yet your immediate developmental challenges have changed little. The ideas promoted by developmental psychologist Erik Erikson more than 50 years ago offer still-modern guidance. He viewed you as now needing to mature in the two basic ways just noted, by finding a sense of self, or identity, and by learning to establish interpersonal intimacy.

Although you may have left college already, you probably still struggle with finding a sense of self. These days “adolescence” can extend well into the 20s, a result of relaxed parental authority and current economic conditions. Erikson thought adolescents needed to transcend what he called “identity versus ego diffusion.” In other words, are you going to find some fairly stable self-concepts like “I am artistic” or “I am mathematically-skilled” or are you going to end up with a poorly-defined, or “diffuse” sense of self, and thereby harbor an aimless view of the future.

After adolescence (as if it ever ends), you encounter another Eriksonian dichotomy, “intimacy versus isolation.” This developmental stage calls for finding lasting friendships, romantic partnerships, and membership in various social groups.

In response to reading an earlier draft of this article, my 22 year-old friend Rmax sardonically remarked, “ok, that’s all well and good, but just *how* do you find these?” So, Rmax, here’s my reply: Look inside. Look outside. Seek engagement and authenticity. Surrender to the knowledge that you will never in fact “arrive.” What should be the artful evolution of your life, your narrative, will end with death. And why care about that at this point? It is irrelevant.

So now beginning with turning inward, just who are you? You must, via psychotherapy, mediation, spirituality, or whatever means, work through whatever self-limiting internal dramas populate your “inner world.” If you feel inferior because of your domineering, narcissistic father, or you feel superior because of your overly gratifying mother, adjustments must be made. Your vision has been obscured. Get some tissue and clean up your lenses. If problematic DNA leaves you with what is called “Bipolar Disorder, an “Anxiety Disorder,” or some other “diagnosable mental disorder,” then seek proper consultation – and in an active, engaged way, not in a passive-dependent way. Obtain whatever best “treats” those problems.

Jacques Lacan, a more recent interpreter of Freudian ideas, differentiates between the “ego” and the “subject.” The “ego” consists of who you “think” you are, and was developed by early social and ongoing cultural influences. The subject is *who you really are*, and thus Lacan’s and Freud’s emphasis on dreams, slips-of-the-tongue, and the like. Pay attention to those, and also to your choices and the various dramatic themes that characterize your life. As Morpheus

proclaimed in *The Matrix*, “Free your mind!” Dismantle the ego, piece by piece, and be who you are. Nietzsche’s phrase for this was, from Latin, “Amor Fati:” Be who you are.

By also proclaiming, “God is dead,” Nietzsche, who was writing in the late 19th century, meant that the 1500 years of ideological dominance by religion had ended, the subsequent dominance by science was over, and now persons were freed to be who they *truly* are. (Here you encounter an ethical dilemma, i.e. what if you truly are a murderer? But I have no space to explore this here). Nietzsche writes in his 1881 notebook that you must

live your life in such a way that you *must* wish to live it again... If striving gives you the highest feeling, then strive! If rest gives you the highest feeling, then rest! If fitting in, following and obeying give you the highest feeling, then obey! Only make sure you come to know what gives you the highest feeling, and then spare no means.

The never-before-seen-or-even-imagined influence of the mass media obscures your vision of your “subject” (which you can never fully see in any event). Are you able to make a decision about your taste in clothes, for example, without ever truly discovering if that is your real aesthetic? Or are your likings simply implanted in you by a media campaign? Are you attracted to others who look like the Swing dancers in the Gap commercial, or who drink Dos Equis?

Now as you turn outward, what do you see? First and foremost, and most sadly, you are bombarded with influences on your own social behavior. Do you want to be a “nice girl,” or a “slut?” Is your masculinity defined by images of muscular, moustache-donning men who chase objectified women? Do you desire intimacy and, if so, with three friends or ten? Are you interested in marriage, an institution that, in contemporary Europe anyway, is quickly falling out of fashion?

The epidemic of “broken” families, the ascent of technology, the retreat into solo activities like video games, email, and social media are all elements of a breakdown of the

societal capacity for intimacy. For most of you, your closest relationship is with your cellphone. As contemporary comedian Aziz Ansari puts it, “Why did you call me with that shit? Are you on fire? Text me that shit!” Technology increasingly fractures the interpersonal world. Your generation may have lost the ability to “sit down and have a talk.”

I urge you to put down this article, NOW, and begin aggressively addressing the internal (psychological) and external (cultural) influences that block your ability to be present with authenticity and feelings and to love with passion and truth. Rid yourself of any shame you may feel that, unlike your aunt, or that one kid-who-since-sixth-grade-has-been-planning-for-law-school, you feel “lost.” If you have no idea of what you want to do with your life, you are actually ahead of the game. You don’t have to waste time growing out of the wish to be a doctor or a lawyer that is, in fact, your mother’s desire, not yours. Pay attention to what excites you; seek out those that appeal to you. Take your sweet time. You will find yourself, and you will find love, but you must do so as authentically as possible.