

Coming_of_age.doc

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Most of the memories I have written have focused on my experiences while living in a particular location. It occurred to me that I would like to write about a phase of growing up that occurred in several locations.

I have noticed that I am particularly fond of books and movies dealing with the “coming of age” part of life, usually during the teenage years. My best guess is that this has something to do with my own coming of age experience. Two thoughts come to mind. One is that I was particularly happy with myself and my life during that experience. The other is that I may never have actually completed the experience and that I am seeking to better understand what this means to me. It would explain both my apparently lack of maturity in some areas, and perhaps my child like innocence and curiosity.

I wish that what I am going to write would have some wonderful adventurous, or even heroic, aspect, but my current view is that it does not. I write this more for my own search for meaning in life than because I think it would be of interest to others.

When we left Fairlington, Virginia, in the summer of 1950 I had just finished 5th grade. I was, I think, very much still a child in most ways. I loved playing “workup” softball games, riding my bicycle, and spending time with a bunch of neighborhood kids near my age. I collected trading cards, watched “Howdy Doody” on friend’s TV and was reasonably comfortable in school and with friends.

When I left Caracas on my way to college in the summer of 1957 I was, or at least I thought I was, pretty much a young adult. I recall being more than ready to leave home and start a new life. I did not experience any significant home sickness or insecurity during my freshman year at M.I.T. On the contrary, for the most part I loved it all. There were a few rough patches that I will mention, but I did not have any deep angst about not being able to deal with independence and the increased responsibilities I encountered. Looking back I can see that I was still in a fairly safe cocoon of safety, being cared for by others, and having few important decisions to make.

In fact in some ways I was never really completely on my own until I got divorced at age 39 in 1978. I had four years of college and two of graduate school during which I maintained my primary social base in the Theta Delta Chi fraternity, eating most of my meals there and actually living in the house three of the six years, and with fraternity brother room mates two other years. The Army was in some ways a continued experience of being cared for (clothing, food, living quarters, peer friends etc.) and the marriage in the fall of 1964 meant that I never really cooked for myself or really had to deal things like clean clothes. I was, in many ways, spoiled until the divorce in 1978.

So what I want to do here is to look back at those seven years and seek to identify transition events, or marker events that could be interpreted to mean that I had completed one or more transitions before the event.

The two experiences that first come to mind are:

(1) adapting to my school experience in England, including being assimilated into the local culture and getting over my initial upset with the change between being an American kid and an English school boy.

(2) Going from Junior year in high school to Senior year. Up until then I was always younger, smaller, and kind of toadying about dealing with my “betters” (the students in the grades ahead of mine).

Here are a few other events that may have been important transitions for me:

Graduating from high school in 1957 and leaving home to go to Miami, Tampa, Abingdon .. and then college in Cambridge, Massachusetts

My job in Laurens, South Carolina - the first time I was really on my own, looking after all my own needs, as an adult

Leaving MIT in 1963 – active duty in the army, off to Germany

Getting married in 1964

Travelling through Europe with Bonnie in 1965

Moving to Columbus, Indiana – my first full time job, a new life

Matthew’s birth in 1969

Leaving Columbus to live in Hastings-on-Hudson, NY – and working in New York City

The next major event was the divorce in 1978. I suspect the move to the NYC area in 1970 and the job changes between then and 1978 had some challenges worth examining in this context, but none seemed all that overwhelming. The divorce, on the other hand, was a major show-stopper for much of sense of who I had been, who I was, and who I might become. All in all I considered my handling of that experience a rather extreme failure.

I will discuss these in some detail. The other things that come to mind are the growing independence from my parents during the time I was in Caracas. There was nothing planned about this, it just happened that I had a lot of time when neither parent was aware of, or even that interested in, what I was doing. I don’t recall any animosity, and pushing at the limits, or any sense that I was somehow causing them significant concern. They seemed to either trust me to work things out appropriately (my best guess) or they were just not aware or interested in the level of independence I felt and explored.

In many coming of age stories I have read the young protagonist must deal with authority figures, often parents, teachers or bosses, who are trying to hold the young person back from doing what they feel called to do. The pivotal coming of age experience is often related to fighting for independence, breaking free, and even defeating the person who was holding them back. Though I had a few run-ins with teachers, I don’t see them as significant. I do not recall feeling that my parents were too strict and that I was at war with them for my freedom.

I do recall that I was a little annoyed that my father would not let me get a car driver’s license, I’ll write about that. However, neither he nor mother prevented me from getting a motor-scooter, and, for a while, a motor cycle. Nor did they seem concerned if I stayed out all night playing poker. With few exceptions I never did anything I would be ashamed to tell them about and they did not ask a lot of questions about where I had been when I came in late. The fact that I had a paper route for over two years and had to get up and out early every morning seven days a week certainly communicated to them that I was not a wild irresponsible young man in at least some primary ways.

I enjoyed that freedom and did a lot of things (e.g. motorcycles, tennis, swimming, poker, parties, outings to clubs and sometimes adult venues) that I enjoyed without getting into any trouble or being rebuked or punished. I was kind of allowed to set my own limits regarding things like alcohol, sex, bad company and the like and, fortunately ended up on a fairly safe, but not especially inhibited path. That's how it seems to me now. I can see a case for arguing that I was actually very inhibited and safe in my choices and certainly was not a daring adventurer who took significant risks. Interestingly I was never exposed to any illegal drugs while in high school or college. I think that might have had some impact on my "no risk" life during those years.