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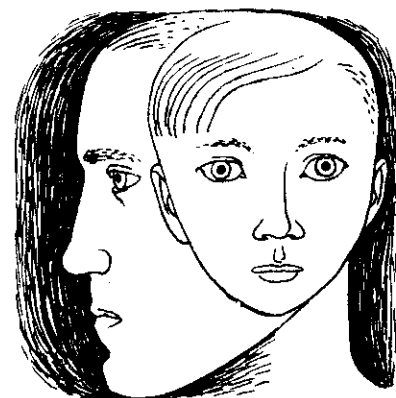
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WHAT IS MATURITY?

An abridgment of the second of two talks given by DR. GEOFFREY BLAKE-PALMER, Medical Superintendent, Seacliff Hospital, and Lecturer in Mental Diseases at the University of Otago



IN my earlier talk attention was drawn to the fact that many of us carry over into adult life emotional responses and patterns of reaction which were more appropriate to the nursery. Beneath a facade of physical maturity there too often lurks an emotional pattern fixed at a childhood level. Such patterns, like character, have a more or less stable and enduring quality. It is very important that their nature is understood by the individual and recognised for what it is by those with whom they come in contact. Despite the assertions of the moralist and the assumptions of the legislator, emotion and sentiment are too often the deciding factors in very important issues in an individual life. Even where the dangers are recognised and an attempt is made by organisations, which themselves may not be too well qualified, to give some measure of instruction, the real issue may be determined on the basis of emotion and wishful thinking.

It is not difficult to seek scapegoats. It is more difficult to replace them, for they save personal effort and concern. Take, for example, marriage and the whole complex question of the present day attitude to sex morality. There seems to be a deep-seated belief that by means of lectures, pamphlets and various forms of instruction alone, these matters can be arranged more satisfactorily. There is at present little informed or controlled inquiry and less real planning given to preparation for marriage than for the selection of a recruit for compulsory military training. Even where health of the partners is reviewed, little attention is paid to compatibility, temperament or purpose. All too often a vague happiness is the primary aim without any very clear idea as to why this should be more easily come by with added responsibilities than it was before.

I fear that so muddled is the thinking in these matters that some believe marriage may be a good treatment for neurosis, or an exchange of marriage partners a substitute for self-mastery and understanding. All this points to a great deal of wishful thinking and a great aversion to facing the realities in a situation. The partner is often first invested with ideal qualities, which may well be a shadow of the infantile hero or heroine, and then blamed or reviled for not coming up to expectation.

The roots of these troubles spread very early in life and there can be little doubt that negative influences in home and school, ignorance, and an immature psychological pattern (often arising from negative parental attitudes to the natural bodily functions) do much to hinder the attainment of a healthy maturity of outlook. At the first check old fears are reawakened. Old memories of parental unhappiness, if such existed, are revived. Echoes of parental warnings intrude with increasing insistence. The child,

sensing it has stumbled on forbidden topics, puzzles, worries or fantasies in secret and perhaps with an awakening sense of unhealthy shame, rather than reverence for the mysteries of life.

Persistence of childhood influences and ways into adult life may prove an effective bar to the attainment of maturity. Difficulties also arise when children are taught the certainties of a group in such a way as to believe that absolute truth has been reached: fixed, final and beyond review. Conflicting desires may be repressed or further inquiry stifled. Perhaps some harm may also arise from too early training of the child to conform with the adult patterns of the community. The child is not infrequently faced with stern disapproval at inevitable lapses and may despair of attaining the standard set.

An opposing danger—or perhaps one should say a complementary danger—arises from that excessive concern on the part of apprehensive parents to protect the child from all the consequences of its own actions even where the danger is insignificant. Every child must be protected from real danger and must be taught to recognise it for what it is. But it should learn that the cat scratches by practical experience.

It is, I believe, unwise to allow children to think that what hurts them is bad instead of their learning why they get hurt. It is much worse to teach them that if they are good they won't get hurt; or that things that get in the way are bad; that leads the child to expect that all things that are hurtful or hateful should be removed from his path. The germs of acceptance of reality cannot be instilled too early. It is hard enough for most people to come to terms with it in any event. Childhood habits which make for ease in side-stepping uncomfortable facts prove an almost insuperable bar to the fuller attainment of maturity in adult life.

So far maturity has been considered in relation to the child and to education. I have been asked to make reference to maturity in relation to religious experience and political thought. Let us first consider political thought as defined of old. "The study of the activity of government, of the management of the public or common affairs." I fear that today there may also be some awareness of the first and second principles to which Aristotle attached such importance. "First that they shall live" (that is to say supply and defence) and second "that they shall live well." It will be realised that concern with differences

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