

# ***THE AGE OF ENDARKENMENT***

By Michael Ventura

## Part I

“Adolescence” is a cruel word. Its cruelty hides behind its vaguely official, diagnostic air. To say someone is “adolescent,” “going through adolescence” or, worse, “being adolescent” is to dismiss their feelings, minimize their troubles and (if you’re their parent) protect yourself from their uncompromising rage. The words “teenager” and “teen” are worse. They reek of cuteness. But we all know that being a “teen” doesn’t feel cute.

People that age hardly ever use those words. They tend to call themselves “kids” when pushed, as in, “What makes you think you know so much about kids – you sure don’t know much about *me!*” Or they dress up and act out and give themselves better words: “punk,” “gothic,” “rapper,” “gang-banger,” “low-rider,” “homeboy,” “skinhead,” “soc,” “greaser,” “hippie,” “freak,” – words to remind us just how volatile, how dangerous, how “freaked out,” “radical,” “awesome,” “bummed,” “bitchen,” “groovy,” “wasted,” and “bad” those years really are.

When we don’t have apt words for something it’s because of an unspoken collective demand to avoid thinking about it. *That’s* how scary “adolescence” is. Which is also to say: that’s how scary our very own unspeakable adolescence was. And when we are finally past it (which often doesn’t happen till we near 40), then we turn around and see the young and pretend that they are foreign to us, that we don’t know just what they’re going through, that we don’t get their music, their fashions, their words. James Baldwin said, “One can only face in others what one can face in oneself.” What we cannot face when we cannot face the young is, plainly, ourselves. (And this is the song of families.) Our secrets, our compromises, our needs, our lacks, our failures and our fear that we’re going to fail again – all this stirs and starts to growl somewhere deep inside when the young look hard into our grown-up eyes. It’s as though, in some dark way, they are privy to our secrets, even to what we don’t know about ourselves, and when they so much as glance toward those parts of us, oh, our old panics resurrect, those demons we thought we’d dealt with, grown out of, transcended, escaped – it only takes this goddam kid, and the beasts awake. As a parent, you may measure your fears by the extent of your distance from that kid.

But perhaps, when we love them, our greatest fear is: that we cannot help them, cannot protect them, and that we have nothing real to give them. And their greatest rage is: that we cannot help them, cannot protect them and that we have nothing useful to give.

When something is true of virtually everyone, it’s unlikely that the fault is individual, but we feel and fear this mess as individuals – kids and grown-ups both. Individually, kids can’t help but judge us for this state of affairs, just as we can’t help but flee their judgment. All that we share with them, then, is a scream: THIS ISN’T FAIR! We *do* have useful things to give, if they would only take them, but they can’t seem to. Again, individually, their refusal to take what we try to give seems pernicious and willful, but when you look at them collectively, you see that they’re obviously not in control of their refusal; they *have* to refuse us, no one knows why. They must, even when that refusal makes them secretly ashamed, which in turn makes them worse, which makes us worse. It

seems that no matter what, the very act of raising kids will, at the onset of adolescence, throw kids and parents both into negative extremes.

It's as though kids have a fundamental craving for negatives in their dealings with their parents and with adults in general, and will stop at practically nothing to invoke that negativity. We've come (unofficially) to accept this. "How old is your kid?" "Fifteen." "Oh my God." And everyone knows what that means.

Our models for dealing with these issues are psychological. Which is absurd. You can't reduce a collective phenomenon, a phenomenon that cuts across every class and culture, a phenomenon with fundamentally the same elements in Harlem and Beverly Hills, at Woodstock and Tian An Men Square, in English soccer matches and Palestinian villages – you can't reduce a phenomenon like that to individual or family causes. To do so ignores and dismisses *the* most important piece of data we have: the fact that despite different histories, cultures, technologies and economies, the same basic thing is happening everywhere to everyone – often in waves of simultaneity.

Two writers have described "adolescence" most tellingly for me. The first is Los Angeles educator Mike Rose, in his crucial book *Lives on the Boundary* (Free Press/Macmillan, 1989): "Kids have no choice but to talk in extremes; they're being wrenched and buffeted, rabbit-punched from the inside by systemic thugs." Rose's thought gets elaborated by rock critic Michael Corcoran in *The Austin Chronicle*: "Rap and its polar opposite but sometimes bedfellow, heavy metal, are the [present] counterpart to 50's rock & roll and 70's punk. It's rebel music, soul music, kids' music. It understands what parents and teachers don't, that puberty is not about hair or pimples or cracking voices; it's a beast, a demon. It's a beautiful rage that wants to belong and sometimes only can through dumb, simple, angry music. It stirs deep emotions that sometimes get out of hand. It ignites the same spirit that makes us fall in love, have children and believe in God."

We tend to think of this extremism in the young as something new, peculiar to our times, caused by pop or TV or the collapse of values. The history of our race doesn't bear this out, however. Robert Bly and Michael Meade, among others, remind us that for tens of thousands of years tribal people everywhere have greeted the onset of puberty, especially in males, with elaborate and excruciating initiations – *a practice that plainly wouldn't have been necessary unless their young were as extreme as ours*. It means that when conservatives talk of rock culture subverting the young or others talk about that same culture liberating the young or when postmodern technologists talk of our electronic environment "rewiring the software" of new generations – they are all making the same mistake. They fail to understand that a psychic structure that has remained constant for 100,000 years is not likely to be altered in a generation by stimuli that play upon its surfaces. What's really going on is very different: the same raw, ancient *content* is surging through the youth's psyches, but adult culture over the last few centuries has forgotten how to meet, guide and be replenished by its force.

Unlike us, tribal people met the extreme of their young (and I'm using "extremism" as a catchall word for the intense cacophony of adolescence) with an equal but focused extremism from adults. Tribal adults didn't run from this moment in their children as we do; they celebrated it. They would assault their adolescents with, quite literally, holy terror; rituals that had been kept secret from the young till that moment – rituals that focused upon the young all the light and darkness of their tribe's collective psyche, all its sense of mystery, all its questions, and all the stories told both to contain and answer those questions.

The crucial word here is “focus.” The adults had something to teach: stories, skills, magic, dances, visions, rituals. In fact, if these things were not learned well, the tribe could not survive. But the rituals did not splatter this material all over the young from the time of their birth, as we do. They focused, and were as selective as possible about, what they told and taught, and when. They waited until their children reached the intensity of adolescence, and then they used that very intensity’s capacity for absorption, its hunger, its need to act out, its craving for dark things, dark knowledge, dark acts, all the qualities we fear most in our kids – the ancients used these very qualities as teaching tools.

Through what the kids craved, they were given what they needed. Kids of that age crave extremes of experience – they crave this suddenly and utterly, and are possessed by their craving. They can’t be talked out of it, or conditioned out of it. It’s in our genetic coding, if you like, to crave extremes at that age. (So they must certainly feel rage, as in our culture, adults tell them that these cravings are wrong.) At the same time, these kids *need* the cosmology and skills appropriate for survival in their world. The kids can create the extremes for themselves – they’re quite good at that – but not the cosmology, not the skills. And without those elements, given at the proper time through the dark-energy channels that have suddenly opened in the young and go clear down to their souls, the need for extremes is never really satisfied in its *purpose*, and hence it goes on and on (creating what we call “modern culture,” which, looked at this way, is little more than a side effect). Our ancestors satisfied the craving for dark energy while meeting the need for cosmology and knowledge, and we call that “initiation.” This practice was so effective that usually by the age of 15 a tribal youth was able to take his or her place as a fully responsible adult.

Because our culture denies the craving, we can’t possibly meet the need – so most of us never truly grow up or feel, in our hearts, adult. How, then have we responded? For about 40 years now, the young have generated forms – music, fashion, behaviors – that prolong the initiatory moment. In other words, we cherish and elongate adolescence. For tribal people, the initiatory moment was by far the most intense period of life, lasting no more than weeks, at most about a year. For us, it now lasts decades. And it’s as though the pressure to make it last decades increases its chaotic violence. This very extension of the initiatory moment is helping to drive everyone mad.

## Part II

But tribal life ended in Europe a thousand years ago, so why didn’t we have “extended adolescence” until the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century? The answer is that before World War II we were between worlds. The prewar world, going back several hundred years, was deeply repressive and viciously exploitive – but orderly. Orderly enough, when compared with today, to enforce its spiritual and political repressions. Initiation didn’t happen, hadn’t happened in the West for a long time; instead, the dark craving-period in the young was utterly squashed, all the richness it demanded was denied, creating in individuals a kind of deadness, a stiffness that became “adulthood,” “maturity.” By the age of 17 or so a repression from which there was virtually no release made most people rigid enough to bear the responsibilities society demanded. It was a rigidity that passed (and, in our nostalgia, still passes) for strength, a sort of lifeless life, where one did one’s duty and

made a virtue of stoicism. Whether or not people felt particularly alive, they got things done. Society said – and still tries to say – that was enough.

Every now and again Europe would see a burst of revolution against all this, usually expressed politically. (Politics is always an excuse to act out something deeper.) These outbursts were short-lived and things quickly returned to “normal.”

The American Revolution was a special case, however. Once America had freed itself from Europe, a small population had an entire continent it could overrun, while the repressed peoples of Europe finally had a place to escape to – a nation that called for boundless energy for expansion. The thing we call “the Western world” was an unconscious well of dark energy that hadn’t been satisfied with a purpose, hadn’t been initiated – and the thing we call “America” is what that dark energy found to do.

America gave permission for this unappeased adolescent state of craving to expand and find substitute appeasement any way it could – this was called “freedom” and “free enterprise,” the spectacle of which got Europe as feverish as a priest who hears people screwing through a thin wall. Things heated up, and in both Europe and America the energy found a new way to expand: technology.

We hold technology responsible for lots of change, forgetting that technology is first and foremost a human *expression*. Like all human expressions, it results from the needs of the soul. It’s an effect before it’s a cause. Technology began as a longing, a bottomless wish not to be trapped any longer in Western life. *That’s* why other cultures didn’t invent it. Not because they were more primitive, but because they liked their lives better.

So one or two thousand years of stymied Western energy finally found its ultimate outlet, its escape, in technology. In this sense, all the technological power surging around us is not new power, it’s the impacted power of our past – and squelched inner power that doesn’t die when people die but stays contained, fit to bust, in the culture.

Technology is made of the unused potential of our ancestors. *That’s* the “ghost in the machine”: the collective psyche’s escape into *things*, into the computer, the car, the TV – wildly breaking free.

Both World Wars were fought by means of those machines, those ghosts – that’s why they were so devastating. It wasn’t only people in the present fighting each other, it was also the congealed energy of generations let loose uncontrolled. When it was over, the issue of human beings opening up and expressing their souls was over, too; the issue now was human beings scrambling to catch up to the energies that had been loosed.

The immediate personal result was that enforced repression on a family level became impossible. And not only in the West. World War II shook the whole world, and we now know that enforced familial repression no longer worked even in the most un-Western or politically repressive places. What, for instance, would have happened to Mao if he hadn’t managed to harness that energy in the young for his own ends during China’s so-called “Cultural Revolution” – for it is not within human capacity for one person to *create* such movement in others. Those young people were on the move, and Mao was clever enough to deflect it from himself and direct it toward his “enemies.” What happened in Cambodia at almost the same time, when you strip the political lingo away, is that the kids murdered the grown-ups. While in Mexico and Chile, the grown-ups murdered the kids. And in the United States and Europe it was a stand-off.

The fact is that most people born during and just after World War II hit “adolescence,” the initiatory moment, with a vengeance, in virtually the same way, with

negative and positive poles of the same phenomenon, almost everywhere – while adults freaked out and resisted. Please don't try to explain that with the psychology of individuals or families, or with the sociology and politics of what were then still separate societies. Far more mysterious patterns, laws of human behavior we have barely begun to intuit, were at play.

The effect of World War II on the young, then, was that the craving-period, the initiatory moment, could no longer be squashed. The war had accelerated technology to the point where adults couldn't keep up with their own changes, much less police their children's. So, left to their own devices, for the first time in Western history, the young began generating forms – music, fashions, customs, an entirely new culture – *intended* to prolong the initiatory craving-period. (Just because this wasn't conscious doesn't mean it wasn't intended; instinct isn't conscious, but it has definite, specific purposes.)

This phenomenon, or complex of phenomena, multiplied wildly every year, until now the dark-tinged craving-period we choose to call “adolescence” has literally become the cultural air we breathe all over the world. And while it's true that most of these forms are now corporately controlled, they originated from the bottom up, they were spontaneously generated by young people – and the corporations that now control them are run by people of that first generation of unleashed young.

The result is that, under the guise of “entertainment” (music, movies, television) a sense of “adolescent” volatility is now enforced the way the image of “mature” rigidity once was. Where once the insulated classes of society could pretend to be “normal,” allowing only a few “artists” (dark-energy stunt men) to dispense manageable and usually harmless doses of initiatory power, while the military and the poor were forced to stew in the *real* madness – now there are no more such distinctions. Chaotic “teenage” intensity, dark-tinged extreme experience, hallucinatory dislocation, is business as usual, the stuff of everyday life, everyday art. This darkness is what pop, rap, TV, voices, poems and novels mostly *do*. It's what they're made of. Even billboards. You can't escape it anywhere.

The way tribal people treated this period in their young was to expose them, through precise ritual, to what the Australians call “the dreamtime” – the psyche's mysteries in their rawest forms. And that is what this world cultural environment, structured by the priorities of adolescence minus the instruction of fully initiated elders, is doing: it's exposing everybody to the mysteries of the psyche in their rawest acted-out forms.

An age of endarkenment. The world is aflood with dark psychic fluid – everything's stained with it. We say we hate the stuff, but we don't act that way, we splash in it. Would we, if there weren't an irresistible collective need for endarkenment? Such a profound mass phenomenon is far beyond right or wrong, good or evil, justice or injustice – and far, far beyond any political remedy. It's going to take awhile to work itself out. A century or two. How did Dylan put it 25 years ago? “Come on out, the dark is just beginnin'.”

November 30, 1990  
December 14, 1990

*Copyright © Michael Ventura. All rights reserved.*