

The Age of Endarkenment

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By Michael Ventura

PART I: THE AGE OF ENDARKENMENT

“ADOLESCENCE” is a cruel word—all the more because it hides its cruelty behind its vaguely official, diagnostic air. The word sounds as if it was invented by somebody part professor, part cop. It condescends, puts “adolescents” in their place. To say someone is an “adolescent,” “going through adolescence,” “being an adolescent,” is usually to dismiss their feelings, minimize their troubles, and (especially if you’re trying to be their parent) protect yourself from their uncompromising rage. The words “teenager” and “teen” are worse. They reek of cuteness—and hypocrisy. For we all know that, whatever else is true of being a “teen,” it doesn’t feel cute.

You will almost never hear them use these words. In my experience, they tend to call themselves “kids” when pushed, as in “What makes you think you know so much about kids, how many kids do you know, you sure don’t know much about me!” Or they dress up and act out as though to give themselves other 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,” “bummered,” “bitchin’,” “groovy,” “wasted,” “awesome,” “bad” those years really are.

When we don’t have apt words for something it’s because of an unspoken, forceful 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, private, unspeakable adolescence was, and when we finally are past it (in America that often doesn’t happen until we near 40) then we turn around and see the young and pretend that they are foreign to us, we don’t know what they’re going through, we don’t understand their music, their fashions, their words, their

codes. As somebody who has felt and said this (only yesterday!) I am writing to tell you that I think we are lying.

James Baldwin's lines comes back to haunt: "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.) We cannot, do not want to, face our secrets, our compromises, our needs, our lacks, our past failures and the unspoken certainty (for we're old enough to know, now) that we're going to fail again, and that's only the stuff we know about ourselves, consciously—what about what we don't know, and don't want to know? All of it, especially what we don't want to know, stirs and starts to growl somewhere deep inside when adolescents look hard into a parent's eyes. It's as though, in some dark way, they are privy to all our secrets, they sense where it all is, and when the young so much as glance toward those parts of us, oh, then all our old panics resurrect, all the demons we thought we'd dealt with, grown out of, transcended, escaped—it only takes this goddamn kid, and the beasts awake, and we may measure our fear of them by the extent of our distance from that very kid.

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

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, and they can't help but judge us for it as we can't help but flee their judgment.

All that we share with them, then, is an inner scream: This isn't fair! We do have useful things to give, if they would only take them—but they can't seem to. Individually, their refusal to take what we have to give, no matter how we try to give it, 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, even when their own refusal makes them secretly ashamed, which in turn makes them worse, which makes us worse. It seems that no matter what anybody does in America, the very act of raising the kids seems, at the onset of adolescence, to throw kids and parents into negative extremes.

In fact we've reached a point where we take this for granted.

"How old's your kid?"

"Fifteen."

"Oh my God."

It's as though the kids have a fundamental craving for negative extremes in their dealings with their parents especially and with adults in general—and will stop at practically nothing to invoke that negativity. And everyone has come (unofficially) to accept this fact.

All our models for dealing with these issues are psychological. Which is, frankly, absurd. You can't reduce a collective phenomenon, a phenomenon that cuts across every class and most countries, that has 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 and family causes. To try to do so goes far beyond not making sense—it's to ignore the most important piece of data we have, which is the very fact that the same basic thing is happening everywhere to everyone.

As the mid-1990s come and go, and kids become the dominant population of most of the world, there'll be no way to ignore that data anymore.

PART II: THE INITIATORY MOMENT

Two writers, from very different disciplines, have described "adolescence" most tellingly for me. Educator Mike Rose in his crucial, though as yet critically ignored, *Lives on the Boundary* (The 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."

A thought elaborated by rock critic Michael Corcoran, writing in *The Austin Chronicle* a year or so ago: "... rap and its polar opposite, but sometime bedfellow, heavy metal, is the '80s counterpart to '50s rock and roll and '70s 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. Rap doesn't incite violence, nor does metal. 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 relatively new, peculiar to our time. The history of the race doesn't bear this out. Robert Bly and Michael Meade, among others, teach that tribal people everywhere 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. But, unlike us, tribal people met the extremism of their young (and I'm using "extremism" as a catch-all word for the intense inner cacophony of adolescence) with an equal but focused and instructive extremism from the adults.

The 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—a secrecy kept by threat of death, so important was this "adolescent moment" to the ancients; 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 to both harbor and answer those questions. Their "methodology," if you like, deserves looking at, since these societies lasted with fair stability for at least 50,000 years.

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 and completely, the tribe could not survive. But the adults 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 in 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 if, as in our culture, adults tell them that these cravings are wrong, disruptive, and/or don't really exist—which New Agers do as surely as Victorians.) At the same time, these kids need cosmology and skills apt for survival in their world. The kids can create the extremes for themselves—they're quite good at it; 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.

Tribal cultures satisfied the craving while supplying the need, and we call that “initiation.” This practice was so effective that usually by the age of fifteen a tribal youth was able to take his/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 heart of hearts, adult. Of course, we have an infinitely more complex, fragmented world to pass on to our young—a world that can't, in fact, be “passed on” because it's still in the process of inventing itself, furiously, mercilessly, every day, every hour. So how have the young responded? For about forty years, now, they have generated forms—music, fashions, behaviors—that prolong the initiatory moment, i.e., that cherish and elongate adolescence—as though hoping to be somehow initiated by chance somewhere along the way.

For tribal people the initiatory moment was by far the most intense period of life, and lasted usually no more than weeks, at most about a year. For us, it now can stretch into a couple of decades. And, in a kind of negative feedback system, the pressure to make it last decades makes it more and more violent at the outset.

This very extension of the initiatory moment is helping to drive everybody mad.

PART III: OUR INITIATORY ENVIRONMENT

For tribal people, initiations were the most crucial, pivotal ceremonies of life. Ceremonies into which all other tribal life was compressed, and, at the same time, from which the life of

the tribe was derived. The seedtime. The fact that we've prolonged that initiatory moment for decades is a psycho-active element in our era that is hard to underestimate.

But why is this a late-twentieth-century phenomenon? Tribal life ended in Europe a thousand years ago. Why hasn't this been going on, then, for at least a thousand years?

Before the Second World War, it was as though we were between worlds. The pre-war world, going back at least several hundred years, was deeply repressive and viciously exploitive—but orderly. At least, orderly enough (certainly when compared to today)—orderly enough so that the repression upon which it was based could be enforced. Initiation didn't happen, hadn't happened in the West for a long time; the dark craving-period in the young was most often utterly squashed, such that it turned in on itself, creating in individuals a kind of deadness, a stiffness that became adulthood, maturity. By the age of 17 or so the effects of a repression from which there was virtually no release or escape had made most people rigid enough to assume 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 duties and made a virtue of stoicism. Whether or not people felt particularly alive, they got things done. And certainly there was something to be said for that.

Every now and again there would be a burst of revolution against this, usually expressed politically—but that was nothing new, there'd been such bursts for hundreds of years. They were short-lived and things returned to "normal" quickly. Even the French Revolution made comparatively small headway (small in relation to its scope and violence) against the general repressiveness.

America was a special case—till roughly 1900 it had a frontier where the rules didn't apply, which in turn kept its more "civilized" sectors agitated. That's why most of the innovations that became the twentieth century—cars, light bulbs, radios, motion pictures, radio-activity, even democracy itself—became institutions here first, no matter where they originated. By contrast, the European countries had their frontiers, their colonies, safely distant from their centers. Those countries could exploit their artificial frontiers economically without changing as much socially. America, organically connected to its wild places, couldn't do that.

But somehow the Second World War unleashed new energies. (The real collective reason for the war, Thomas Pynchon suggests in *Gravity's Rainbow*, was precisely for the final burst of these slowly pent-up energies.) The energies were expressed technologically, but we forget that technology is an expression—it's an effect before it's a cause. In any case, those unleashed energies made enforcement far less of a sure thing. On a family level, enforced repression soon became impossible in the West—as it is now becoming everywhere. But we know now that enforcement became problematic even in the most repressive countries. What, for instance, would have happened to Mao if he hadn't managed to harness that energy in the young for his own ends in China—if, that is, they were his own ends, if he wasn't just making the best, his best, of a critical situation. Mao perhaps directed the energy of the "Cultural Revolution," but it is not within human capacity for one person to create such energy.

The fact is that all over the world, the children born during and just after the Second World War hit "adolescence," the initiatory moment, with a vengeance, in virtually the same way, with negative and positive poles of the same phenomenon, virtually everywhere. Please don't try to explain that to me with the psychology of individuals or the economics and politics of what were then still separate societies. Something far more mysterious, laws of human behavior we haven't begun to differentiate, appear to have been in play.

So the effect of the Second World War on the young was that the craving-period, the initiatory moment, could no longer be squashed. Adults could hardly keep up with the changes in their own lives, much less police their children's. What had happened only among the very privileged (rich whites) or the disenfranchised (blacks) in the twenties, was now going on everywhere: the young were generating forms—music, fashions, and customs—that had the effect of prolonging the initiatory craving-period. Just because that result 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 geometrically every year, it seemed, until now the dark-tinged craving-period we choose to call "adolescence" has literally become the cultural air we breathe. 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 many of them are run

by people of that first generation of these 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.

Of course, this has gone hand-in-hand with the population explosion. Cause and effect get awfully muddled here. (The very notion of cause and effect probably won't be with us much longer.) The population explosion and the prolonged craving-time seem causes and effects of each other. And the situation, with all its causes and effects marinating each other, has become this:

The world has become adolescent. Chaotic “teenage” intensity, dark-tinged extreme experience, is business as usual, the stuff of everyday life. (Something once tolerated only in artists—for what has being an “artist” meant, in the West, but prolonging the initiatory moment? Filtered through the disciplines of art, artists deal with much the same material that the ancients taught in their rituals—and that is no coincidence).

The way that 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 form. 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 most raw acted-out forms.

By the mid-1990s half the world will be “teens.” Half the world will be in that natural, unavoidable state of craving extreme and dark experience while, at the same time, demanding the structure of instruction—instruction that no one can give on such a scale. And if it can't be done by the family or the community, where can they turn but to the larger collective? Hence their demand—inchoate, unreasonable, and irresistible—is that history initiate them.

History itself.

What a ride.

For we've already seen what happens when this nonverbal and unconscious demand of youth is acted out in the sphere that we usually call history. It was attempted briefly in

America during that time we label “the sixties.” And in France, in ’68; in Czechoslovakia during the “Prague Spring”; in China during the Cultural Revolution and, more recently, in Tian An Men Square. It’s still going on in Palestine, while in Europe the impulse has birthed the Greens, in Russia “perestroika.” (You can’t credit mass events to one man, as Tolstoy so brilliantly diagrammed in *War and Peace*—even if he’s Gorbachev.) It happened in Cambodia—where what mostly happened, if you strip the political lingo from it, was that the kids murdered the grown-ups. And the prolongation of the initiatory moment has everything to do with why there’s such a massive drug market in the United States. And it will keep on happening, more and more, everywhere, until—

Until what? That is the question, and nothing but history can answer it. There’s no going back. In many tribal initiations, if you don’t pass you die. We don’t know what will satisfy the demands of this massive, unprecedented attempt at initiation, or if it can be satisfied. But we can guess the consequences if it can’t.

And yes, of course: no one phenomenon can supply the entire context of what’s happening to us all. But I have no doubt that this unconscious, compulsive prolonging of the initiatory moment into decades—is at the crux of our fate.

PART IV: NEW YEAR’S EVE

We live in a culture where individuals and institutions behave as though convinced that, even though they’re acting much like everybody else, the source of their behavior is confined to their psyches, their families, their confined personal worlds. (I am not saying that to peer into your personal psychology is a worthless activity; it can be crucial for growth. But it’s not the whole story and it may not even be the half.) We have no coherent way to think collectively—at least no way that’s not reductive, and, therefore, personally insulting. Our inner darkness is something to be processed, “shrunk,” transcended, individuated, got rid of; while our inner light is diluted into Christian or New Age platitudes. This renders incomprehensible such words as these of the Greek poet George Seferis: “I watched you with all the light and darkness I have.” Instead our light and darkness tend to come out in their most strident forms—drugs, guns, cults, and brutal (punk) or sickly sweet (New Age) sounds.

Still, we all have moments that escape these strictures.

For me, one of those moments happened a while ago, when I was living with a woman and her thirteen-year-old son. Later I would lose them both, through all the reasons that you lose people these days. But there was this one night, and it's worth telling as a coda to this web of thoughts.

It was New Year's Eve. They had gone to a party. I hadn't felt like it. They got back well past midnight. I had waited up for them. They were telling me about their evening—when the boy suddenly (and this wasn't "like" him) started to sob. When we asked him why he burst out with, "Everything is so fucked, it's all so fucked, what's the point, it's all so fucking fucked."

I loved—and love—that boy. So I wanted to comfort him, to tell him things weren't that bad, it would all be all right—but it was no time to lie. What I said to him, straight into his eyes—and he seemed to get it, that one night, and I pray often, often, that he'll remember it—was this:

That we are living through a dark age. An age, if you like, of "endarkenment"—and I don't necessarily mean that negatively. The world is aflood with dark psychic fluid, everything's stained with it. We all say we hate the stuff, but we don't act that way, we splash in it.

It's an age in which, for reasons we can't comprehend, everything's being turned inside out, everything's imploding and exploding at once, and we can't stop it. And it's going to continue, it'll go on for a long, long time, longer than we're going to be alive. So we can't find peace, we can't "win," it's not going to be all right. Not for us. But that doesn't have to rob us of purpose; in fact it's the opposite, it implies a great purpose; that what each of us must do is cleave to what we find most beautiful in the human heritage—and pass it on. So that one day, one day when this endarkenment exhausts itself, those precious things we've passed on will still be alive, stained perhaps but functional, still present in some form, and it will be possible for the people of that day to make use of them to construct a life that is a life—that life of freedom and variety and order and light and dark, in their proper proportions (whatever they may be). The life that we'd choose now if we could.

And that to pass these precious fragments on is our mission, a dangerous mission—that if you were going to volunteer for crucial, hazardous work, work of great importance and risk,

this might be the job you drew. And it isn't a bad job at all. Actually, it's best job. And his mother, and me, and our friends—"And you too, man," I said, "I can see it in your eyes"—that's what we're doing here. Trying to do. And it's no small thing, it's the best, man, it's one of the few things left to be proud of.

Later everything went wrong—we have to expect that, now; we imploded and exploded too, like everyone and everything else, and sure, sure, it was because of our childhoods, but it was also because that's what's happening to everyone right now, that's the initiation—or that's part of it, the worst part. Still—I know he got it that night, because it was all in him in the first place, I just put words to it (which is all writers do anyway, it's all there in the first place). Maybe, at the end of his long, long, and, as it must be when things are this way, incomplete initiation, incomplete as mine or yours—then maybe it'll still be there in him, and he'll find his part of the work too.

Maybe the most important thing to remember right now is that many people are doing this work. It's more public in a writer or an artist or an environmentalist, but anyone who loves something life-giving and tends it—to garden, or to read, or to brew beer, or (even this is becoming lost) to take long walks—is, as Pasternak put it, keeping life alive, and passing it on.

For the reality is that we don't have to wait till 1993, we have been in a teenage initiatory state for a while now, and it'll go on for a long while more, far beyond anyone's ability to predict or control, and the best that we can do is to try to endure its cacophony and decipher its purpose while we tend what we love.