

On Becoming Adults: A Review of Sheehy's *Passages*

The predictable crises of childhood have been well documented by child psychologists over the past 25 years. This understanding of personally growth has been useful in guiding our offspring from birth through adolescence. But once the adolescent period is over, what lies ahead? We approach adulthood geared for problem solving, prepared to manipulate things and to maneuver around obstacles. However, according to Sheehy, "We have little understanding that even as grown-ups we may alternate between being in step and being off balance both with ourselves and the forces in our world."

In America, perhaps more than in any other society, we seem to hold the assumption that adult life is ordained to be safe, secure, and serene; and anything which interferes with this view is evidence of our failure and our inadequacies. Such a notion of adult life is a heavy burden, and it is debilitating. In *Passages: Predictable Crises of Adult Life*, Sheehy sets out to do for adult life what Gesell and Spook had done for childhood--to draw up a descriptive (not prescriptive) developmental sequence of adulthood. She begins with the hypothesis that the various conflicts and crises of adult life might well be viewed not as failures or disorders but rather as the same kinds of developmental surges that we have learned to expect in children. Sheehy's research reveals that not only are there crises in every life, not only do they occur with reasonable predictability, but they are normal.

In *Passages*, Sheehy attempts (1) to compare the developmental rhythms of men and women, (2) to examine the predictable crises for couples, and (3) to provide a framework for self-examination which could help others who, like herself, were caught in the snarls of adulthood. The research is imaginative and thorough and she utilizes a wide range of sources. For men and women interested in gaining greater control of their own lives, and for those concerned with human development and family life education, the conclusions are interesting, plausible and useful. She starts the book with a survey of current theories of Erikson, Levinson, and others who have postulated definite growth and transition stages in the normal psychological development of adults.

Sheehy's study grew out of a personal crisis. "I was talking to a young boy in Northern Ireland where I was on assignment for a magazine when a bullet blew his face off. That was how fast it all changed." In her middle thirties, her "happiest and most productive stage," she suddenly found herself quarreling with friends and floundering in her work, suffering intense but unaccountable terrors and strange physical symptoms. By talking with others and by reading, she attempted to make some sense of her own midlife crisis. She concluded that somewhere between 35 and 45 we commonly discover mortality as a fact, not an abstraction. The last remnants of childhood security dissolve. There is no one with you. There is nobody who can keep you safe. There is nobody who will not ever leave you. We are on our own, responsible for ourselves in a world abruptly understood as precarious, and facing the reality that our life is half over. That is, in effect, the "mid-life crisis," an emotional event as predictable as the onset of puberty and often as stormy.

From this beginning Sheehy embarked upon the research that was to help her delineate the other stages of adult development. From the study of 15 individual case histories she has identified the predictable crises of adulthood. For her, a crisis is the strategic interplay of stable periods and critical turning points. However, because our culture's interpretation of crisis is often one that implies personal failure, she refers to these critical transition periods as passages. She identifies the major stage of adulthood as: Pulling Up Roots, The Trying Twenties, Catch-30, The Deadline

Decade, and Renewal or Resignation. Sheehy's thesis is that everyone comes to each crisis and that everyone must resolve the crisis before progressing with new strength and vitality to the next stage. Attempts to dodge, ignore or camouflage the crisis will only prolong the period or necessitate backtracking at a later date when it may be even more painful.

Pulling Up Roots

Before 18, our inner voice says, "I have to get away from my parents." But the words are seldom reflected in action. After 18, we begin pulling up roots in earnest. In attempting to separate ourselves from our parents we cast about for beliefs and values we can call our own. This process of reality testing often draws us to ideas and beliefs which are foreign to our parents.

The tasks of this passage are to locate ourselves in a peer group role, a sex role, an anticipated occupation, an ideology or world views. Just as one part of us seeks to become an individual, another part of us longs for a relationship with another person. A popular myth of this passage is: We can piggyback our development by attaching to a stronger one.

A stormy passage through this first adult stage will probably facilitate the normal progression of the adult life cycle. "If one doesn't have an identity crisis at this point," concludes Sheehy, "it will erupt during a later transition, when penalties may be harder to bear."

The Trying Twenties

How to take hold in the adult world is the question of the Trying Twenties. Our focus shifts from the inner turmoil of "Who am I?" and "What is truth?" to "How do I put my aspirations into effect?" "What is the best way to start?" "Where do I go?" "Who can help me?" "How do you do it?"

The task of the twenties is to shape a dream, that vision of ourselves which will generate energy, aliveness, and hope. We seek to prepare for a life work, to find a mentor if possible, and to develop a capacity for intimacy.

Doing what we "should" is the driving force in the twenties. The "shoulds" are largely defined by family models, the press of culture or the prejudices of our peers.

A terrifying aspect of the twenties is the inner belief that the choices we make are irrevocable. It is largely a false fear, for change is quite possible and probably inevitable. Two impulses are at work: one is to build a firm, safe structure for the future, to "get set." The other is to explore, experiment and keep the options open. The motto of this period is, "I'm different."

Catch-30

Impatient with doing the "shoulds," a new vitality surfaces as we approach 30. Both men and women speak of feeling narrow and restricted. They blame all sorts of things, but in reality they have outgrown the career and personal choices of the twenties. New choices must be made and commitments altered or deepened. To do so involves great change, turmoil and open crisis--a simultaneous feeling of being at rock bottom and ready to break out.

One common response is the tearing up of the life we spent most of our twenties putting together. It may mean setting new goals or modifying others to be more realistic. The single person feels the

push to find a partner, the homemaker longs to venture into the world. The childless couple reconsiders children and almost everyone who is married, especially those married for more than seven years, feels a discontent. For the couple experiencing Catch-30, it is perceived as a lack of mutuality and being out of "sync" with each other or psychologically being at different places at the same time.

The Deadline Decade

Time starts to squeeze in the mid-thirties. We have reached the halfway mark. The loss of youth, the faltering physical powers, the fading purpose of stereotyped roles, the spiritual dilemma of having no absolute answers. Such thoughts usher in a decade between 35 and 45 that Sheehy calls the "Deadline Decade." It is a time of both danger and opportunity and those who make the most of the opportunity will have a full blown authenticity crisis. To come through this authenticity crisis, we must reexamine our values and reevaluate how we will use our resources from now on. "Why am I doing all of this?" "What do I really believe in?"

Women experience this passage earlier than men do. In spite of all their qualms and confusion about where to start looking for a new future, this is usually an exhilarating period for women. Assertiveness begins to emerge, a stronger ego.

Men respond to the Deadline Decade by pressing down harder on the career accelerator and viewing it as "my last chance" to pull away from the pack. Men discover that they have been too anxious to please and too vulnerable to criticism. Regardless of the level of achievement he has attained, the man of 40 usually feels stale, restless, burdened, and unappreciated. He worries about his health and he wonders "Is this all there is?" He may make a series of departures from well-established base lines, including marriage. A more tender, care-giving side emerges.

Renewal or Resignation

Equilibrium is regained and a new stability is achieved. If one has refused to confront the mid-life transition, a sense of staleness will calcify into resignation. One by one, the safety and supports will be withdrawn from the person who is standing still. Loneliness becomes pervasive. Parents will become children; children will become strangers; a mate will grow away or go away; the career will become just a job. And each of these events will be felt as abandonment. This crisis will probably resurface again and although its impact will be greater, it may just be strong enough to push the resigned person toward seeking renewal.

For those who confronted self in the middle years and found a renewal of purpose, these may be the best years of their lives. There is increased personal happiness for partners who can say, "I cannot expect anyone to fully understand me."