

Chapter 1

At the Beautiful Gate

Springtime of Life. Youth is the springtime of life. A new vitality is surging through the person, as joyous, as beautiful, as promising, as the revival of the natural world in the spring. Through brief childhood there has been a sowing of seeds good and bad, and now in the warmth and moisture of adolescence they germinate in the soul. The corn and the weeds, the wheat and the tares spring up together, and which shall gain the ascendancy and choke the other out depends upon the work of the husbandman.

Turn of the Road. It is of vital importance that parents understand what is occurring in the lives of their adolescent boys and girls; for while the earlier work of child training has been important and in no small degree affects the life of the youth, now, just now, when every element of life—physical, nervous, mental—is leaping and straining at the leash, just now is the most critical time, when the right teaching may make a life and the wrong teaching may wreck it.

Adolescence. What do we mean by adolescence? It is a word that comes from a Latin root meaning, “to grow up to,” and it denotes the age when the child is growing up to the man or the woman. We may express the same idea by the word “youth,” but “youth” has other meanings than just “the age of growing into manhood or womanhood;” and so we more exactly express this meaning by “adolescence.” The word “adult,” which means a mature person, comes from the same root. The adolescent is the person growing up; the adult is the person grown up.

Puberty. The point at which the person enters adolescence, the point at which he begins to change from boy to man or from girl to woman, we call “puberty.” This comes from a Latin word which means the same as our word “adult.” It seems a little premature, because it takes several years after puberty for a person actually to reach the adult stage. But anyway, by “puberty” we mean the beginning of adolescence.

Varying Age. Puberty comes on the average at a little earlier age to the girl than to the boy. In our land and race, the usual age of puberty for the girl is the twelfth year, for the boy the fourteenth, though in either sex individuals may reach puberty a year or more either before or after these ages. Generally speaking, the more nervous and vivacious

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the temperament, the earlier comes puberty, and the more calm and slow-moving the person, the later is the entrance into adolescence.

Extent of Period. The period of adolescence extends over several years. We may fix it in general from twelve to twenty-four, remembering that some individuals enter it earlier than twelve, and may emerge from it younger in years than twenty-four. The completion of adolescence is not so readily marked as its beginning; for it is indicated not alone by perfection of physical development, but also by mental development—the ripening of judgment, the ability to reason, and the general steadying of the emotions. Indeed, it is rightly said that a large proportion of the population never advance mentally beyond the adolescent period. Nevertheless, though the adult state be only approximated, yet we must for practical purposes fix the closing limit of the adolescent period at from twenty to twenty-four.

A Critical Time. Adolescence, and particularly early adolescence, is the most critical period in the life of the individual. It is the time when the boy and the girl come to the consciousness of the purpose of life, and of their own individual relation to it. In childhood they have been under authority; now they feel an inner urge to independence of will and initiative in action. There are stirring in them new impulses to physical, intellectual, social, and spiritual activity. They cannot be inactive, yet they have insufficient experience to guide them; and whether their course shall be wise and beneficial, or foolish and destructive, depends largely upon their elders' understanding and sympathetic help.

Profound Changes. Few parents understand how profound are the changes which come in their children in adolescence, and particularly at puberty, the beginning of adolescence. Most parents think of their young adolescent children as merely bigger boys and girls. They are far more than that. They have new thoughts, new emotions, new impulses, new ambitions, a new understanding of life; they are indeed new individuals. It is not fantastic to say that the change which comes at puberty is almost as great as the change which comes at birth.

Five Stages. We may note the five stages of human life as, first, gestation, marked at the beginning by conception; second, childhood, begun by birth; third, adolescence, begun by puberty; fourth, maturity; and fifth, senility, or old age. The point of transition from one stage to the next is marked in each case by great changes and new experiences. And each successive stage is attended by less disturbance than the preceding. Conception is the most marvelous of all the processes; the

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mystery of human life which is there begun is beyond our comprehension; but it is not so much the subject of common thought as is birth, because at birth the new human life first comes within the range of our observation. At birth, the fetus becomes the child, and enters upon a more independent existence. Yet through infancy the child is still nourished from the mother's body; and throughout childhood, though gradually assuming more and more independence, the individual is still an adjunct of his parents.

A New Life. But at puberty there comes again a change, less sudden, less violent, less spectacular, than birth, but which affects life not less profoundly. Henceforth the individual is not a child, but a man or a woman. He is not at once a fully developed man or woman, just as the babe at birth is not a fully developed child; but he is not less definitely in the new position. The newborn babe has but little more consciousness than before birth. It sleeps most of the time, it recognizes no one, it distinguishes between sensations only in the most elementary degree; yet it is definitely upon a new basis of existence, taking nourishment in a new way, and having its senses ready to receive new impressions. None of us question that the child is distinctly a new individual as compared to his prenatal existence; but we need to understand that the adolescent is a new individual also as compared to his pre-adolescent existence. And just as the child requires new and different treatment than the fetus, so the adolescent requires new and different treatment than the child.

Maturity. At the close of adolescence comes maturity. The transition from one to the other is not so marked as the change from childhood to adolescence. Yet there is a decided change, a new outlook, a better-balanced judgment, a more settled state of mind. The change from adolescence to mature manhood or womanhood is often marked by some trying experience which purifies the emotions, clears the judgment, strengthens the will, and gives a very definite new vision. Henceforth there is the solidity of manhood or womanhood, and the most creative period of the life is in full swing.

Old Age. The next stage is old age. (Senility, although having exactly the same meaning as old age, is in the popular mind restricted to the experience of decay, or "second childhood.") Old age is least marked of all life's stages at the transition point, and varies greatly in point of time, in different individuals. It begins physically with the failure of the reproductive function; but the other physical powers and the mental powers may continue in full strength for many years.

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Destiny Determined. We say that adolescence, especially the beginning of adolescence, is the most critical period in human life, because at that time the destiny of the life is usually determined. True, the direction of the adolescent life is largely influenced by the training the child has received, and remotely by the prenatal and hereditary influences. All that goes before any period of life has its effect upon that period and succeeding periods. But those influences are not ineradicable; they may by the power of God on the one side, or the influence of the devil on the other, working upon the emotions and the will, be changed into other directions, and a different life may begin.

Swift and Sudden. Of all periods, the adolescent period is the most capable of being influenced and molded. The current of the life is then swift, and slight shifts of the rudder will suddenly steer the ship of the soul into one channel or another. Eighty-five per cent of conversions and of decisions against conversions occur in the first half of the age of adolescence. The whole life direction is determined in adolescence, and particularly in the first years of adolescence. Do we not, then, rightly say that this is the most critical of all life's periods?

Do You Remember? And adolescence is a wonderful time. If you, father, mother, remember at all your thoughts and feelings in that period of your life (and you must make yourself remember), you know how your whole being pulsed with eagerness, with what keenness you experienced joy and disappointment, with what intensity you encountered opportunity and temptation, how anxious you were to accomplish something in life, how charged were your thoughts with questions of right conduct and wrong, and how you grew into the great passion of love which was to affect your whole after career.

Worshiper or Beggar? You stood at the Beautiful Gate of the temple of life. And there to-day stand our sons and our daughters who have come to adolescence. Whether they shall enter it with the firm and buoyant step of physical, mental, and spiritual strength, able to appreciate and ready to participate in its glories, or, crippled of mind and soul, and perhaps of body, must be borne to the gate as beggars, seeking no more than the alms of daily subsistence,- that depends chiefly upon us.

Priesthood of Life. God our Father erected for us the holy temple of life. He ordained that we should serve therein as priests consecrated to His worship and His service. He invested us, men and women, with something of the power which He Himself exercises as creator. All that is beautiful in life, all that is wonderful, all that is glorious, comes from

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the creative power and love of God. And to His children, you and me, He gives the power, not only to admire and to rejoice in His wonderful works, but to become participators with Him in the work of creation.

Children of God. We share with Him in making the fruits of the ground. By our thought and our labor, put forth in preparation of the soil, in planting and tilling and harvesting, we become partners with God in making the earth yield its increase. By our skill in using the material resources of earth, erecting buildings, making machines, harnessing electricity, perpetuating knowledge through books, we are showing forth the divine powers with which our Father endowed us. Worthily done, all these activities broaden our vision and deepen our appreciation of God and of His kingdom. Yet they are minor manifestations of the vital power which is God's gift to us.

Creators With Him. Greatest of all His gifts, evidence of our divine origin, our Father has given to us the power of perpetuating life, the power of creation, or of delegated creation,- procreation. That men and women should have the power to become fathers and mothers, to bear children, is the crown of kinship with God. Here is the "holy of holies," wherein lies the mystery of life no mind can fathom, no soul explore. Man, if he be at all above the brute, when he comes to the experience of fatherhood, is lifted into a realm of understanding and aspiration and power that he never knew before. Woman, when she comes into the experience of motherhood, is sanctified by a love and an insight and a power that never otherwise can she have. Dim glimpses only do many parents have of this glory and power, because their souls are crippled; and some there are who know not so much of glory as the beasts in their parenthood. But they who come to the reception and the use and the fruition of these powers of life as the sons and daughters of God, look into the temple of life, and they serve therein with nobility and with gladness.

As Jesus Did. So came the Boy Jesus when He was twelve years old, and seeing as symbols the temple and its gate and its ceremonies and its sacrifices, pierced with His youthful eye the mystery of life, and laid for Himself the noblest career that earth or heaven ever can know. So may it be with our children: living as Jesus lived, seeing as Jesus saw, learning as Jesus learned, may they be the ambassadors of the King, the messengers of light and salvation to a darkened world.

Teachers of Mysteries. To make them such, you and I, fathers and mothers, must face life-our life, their life-as men and women should. We must be patient, we must be courageous, we must have unflinching

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faith in God and in our children. We must have insight into their lives, and know their hopes, their fears, their aspirations, their difficulties. We must above all have abounding love, be intelligent in government, lenient to moods, sympathetic to ambitions and desires. We must be intelligent about the facts of sex life, unashamed of truth, yes, rejoicing to teach the truth. For, rightly conceived, our sex life is revealed as closest partnership with God, the holiest relation that social life affords; and upon the right teaching of its mysteries and its obligations depends in no small degree the happiness of our children.

To understand the conditions and the problems of our children in the adolescent state, let us study their lives.