

The Plight of the Mid-to-Late Twenty-something

By Alan Bennett Ilagan

There comes a time in our lives when we inevitably feel a little lost. The plans we made for ourselves may not be unfolding, or the way in which they have unfolded may not be how we originally envisioned them. It's a time of losing our way, a time of disenchantment and disillusionment ~ and without our illusions and enchantments, life can get rather dull and meaningless. For many of us this time comes in the no-man's-land between our early 20's and early 30's ~ the mid-to-late-twenty-something moment. As a 28-year-old guy, I have arrived here.

You may find it difficult to summon much pity or compassion for us. We are still young enough to get away with partying all night and living it up on a steady diet of drink and excess, but those days are quickly waning. Before long our burgeoning paunches won't be such a cute novelty, the weekend binges will indeed turn into a problem, and the derring-do outfits of younger years really will look ridiculous. The blush will soon be off the early-20's rose and suddenly we will have to really grow up.

It's not as easy as some seem to think. We are like a fleet of aimless ships looking desperately for a chartered course, hoping to go further than anyone ever has, yet at the same time afraid to fall off the edge of the world. Unlike past generations when there were strictly limited options, we now have the planet at our fingertips, and it is rather daunting. Some of us are overwhelmed into inaction, barely attempting to achieve our dreams or goals, safely staying put and settling, while some of us go for it all and fail spectacularly in our abstract internet companies and hot-fingered stock investments.

It is the time to start thinking of serious stuff ~ partners, homes, families, jobs, loans, mortgages ~ all those things that once seemed perpetually out-of-reach are now biting at our heels. The decisions we make are no longer so small or supercilious; they will more or less determine our course in life. Sure, we can always change our mind and choose a different path later on, but as the years pass it gets more and more difficult to follow those whims and fancies.

Where is the instruction manual for life as a bona-fide grown-up? Where is the college course that teaches us how to live in the real world? Not with abstract philosophical examples or general background info, but with specific answers to definitive questions. For example: how does one set up a retirement plan, a financial foundation, how to buy a home, how to choose health insurance, etc. What exactly is an IRA, a 401, or a stock portfolio? The answers may seem obvious to some people, but think back – when exactly did you learn these things? Like pumping gas or registering for selective service – are we just somehow supposed to know how to do all of this?

Of course, these are tangible, concrete concerns, easily addressed by the proper guidance and Internet sites. The more problematic aspect of the mid-late-twenty-something is of a more mental nature, a philosophical question of meaning and motive.

When do we start to put down real roots? When does the pretend, make-believe cool cynicism we have practiced become the real thing, and our jaded pose of the past no longer just a pose? There is a feeling of exhilaration and impending doom, trying to live it to the fullest before we're tied down by real concerns like mortgages and jobs and families.

For my friend Chris the big question is not one of financial planning or home ownership, but rather a crisis of meaning. Chris wants a wife and family (and I assume the home and trappings that go with it), yet he is also a crusader for his career and what he believes in (some sort of social, help-the-people thing). He is plagued with the ever-nagging concern of trying to land the woman of his dreams, while following his ambitious career plans.

Yet for all his seriousness, he is one of the most-fun good-time guys I know. We still share those nights out until 5 AM, carousing from bar to bar in the city, finishing it off with a hamburger and French fries at some all-night diner, and limping into bed as the first light of day breaks. Part of me will always enjoy that excitement of not knowing where the evening will take us, but another part is moving away from such restless yearning. It can't go on forever, and I don't think I want it to.

Some of my friends have a happy husband but no job or career plans; others have stellar careers lined up, amazing apartments, but no one with whom to share it all. My good friend Alissa comes from a long line of independent, single women. She recently

earned her PhD – a feat that took several years out of her life, years which she spent in the brutal winters of Boston, putting up with the strenuous rigors of Harvard and occasionally questioning if it was all worth it. She put her education and career first and foremost, but at what cost? And if she is happy and has done what she wanted to do, does it matter?

I have a job, a home, a partner, a family, a close circle of friends ~ all the things that are supposed to complete a life. Still I wonder, Is this what it's all about? Is this all there is? Granted, I would like to have more money, to be published more often, to be able to travel around the world, to make some sort of difference in my lifetime... but these are luxuries really. My basic needs and desires have all been fulfilled, but still I am searching. Perhaps this isn't the sole province of the twenty-something, but the realm of anyone living in the world today.

My favorite question to ask people older than me is “What do you know now that you wish you had known at my age?” And there is rarely an answer, and certainly not a satisfying one. Maybe there is no clear solution. Maybe the things I know now will be exactly the same things I know in ten or twenty years, I will simply have learned to deal with them more effectively. Is this what growing up and maturing is all about?

I'll probably never stop searching, and perhaps the real plight of the mid-late twenty-something is figuring out how to reconcile this uncertainty without so much complaining. As one can probably tell, I have a long way to go.