

The Eight Stages to Freedom*

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*This article was published in 1970 and has been edited for this web page.

Throughout human history, the children of Adam have alternately grabbed at freedom, philosophized about it, declared it non-existent, confused it with power tactics or attempted to command it into existence – surely an interesting spectacle.

With the coming of Freud and psychoanalysis, we have had other attempts at understanding and reaching for freedom.

Some of the best fruits of this new science are seen in the works of Erik Erikson whose book *Gandhi's Truth* won the National Book Award in (1996). Throughout all of his writings, he has struggled with the problem of a person's self-definition, that is, the experience of personal identity.

Some of the conclusions that Erikson's works have helped us to reach about freedom are that individuals cannot grab for it or deny it or, more importantly, simply assert it. Rather, because a person is a complicated creature having an unconscious as well as a conscious mind, because each individual has a unique personal history, the most we can say is that a person *builds* personal freedom.

It is more correct, however, to say that an individual has the possibility of experiencing personal freedom when there is a happy combination of events, from physical to economical to emotional, for example. It is a life-long task for which Erikson, following Freud, has given the blueprints for in his discussions of the eight stages of man.

In this article I would like to describe, based on Erikson's reflections, the basic materials that make up personal identity and thereby the capacity for freedom. In order to do this, we have to go back to each

individual's Eden, his or her first months and years of life. It is here that are rooted some of the most formative experiences of a person's life.

Each person never stands alone; we exist in community. From the first moment of birth on, mother and child create a mood, as it were, and from their interaction the child gradually builds up an emotional image of the world. If the mothering environment is personal, stable, good enough, the child will experience the world as fulfilling: his or her inner needs, such as hunger, discomfort and love, are not overwhelming but are met by outer satisfactions.

This gradual and repeated harmony of inner and outer interaction will be the source for a sense of the world as trustworthy – as a reliable place. If a child does not experience this, if the mother brings a highly unstable environment to the child, varying her emotional and caring responses, s/he will not be able to experience the surrounding world as reliable. An individual's subjective experience will be one of basic mistrust—in him- or herself and in the environment. That is, inner needs, unmet by outer confirmation, will wander aimlessly. If this happens, the individual will develop a sense of homelessness and foreignness in his or her world. What is difficult for adults to understand is that as infants and small children, each person has to learn reality; learn, that is, how to interpret and respond to his or her experiences. This is not automatic.

Basically, the capacity to trust the world and not to regard it as hostile, to have hopes and dreams, and to work because one feels one's dreams can come true means that in the first six months to one year of life the environment was stable enough to guarantee a basic trust. Trust versus mistrust is not an absolute alternative; in each individual there is a balance of both "moods," so to speak. What we are describing is a predominance of one mood over the other. This is not to deny that everyone has moments of mistrust and self-doubt. For a person to have autonomy and direction in his or her adult life, however, basic trust must be predominate.

The second stage comes between fifteen months and three years of life, and the emerging self develops along the paths of autonomy or shame or doubt. It is the time when the child can walk, crawl and get away from mother; when the child has some rudimentary language and is able to gradually distinguish him- or herself from others, and, very importantly, when the child can start doing things for which s/he earns a reward or punishment.

This stage introduces the child to history, for in the first period of life, if we presume a stable environment, the child is living in paradise—his needs are met and his desires are fulfilled. He is living without time; an infant does not have a concept of time.

What happens progressively in the second and third year is that an infant begins the process of separation from the mothering environment, separating both muscularly and verbally, and begins to develop some rudimentary awareness of a here and now different from before. A child is faced, at this time, with a profound problem: namely, he or she discovers that good mother is also bad mother. Good mother, who provides food, care, warmth and love, and who plays with him or her, is also depriving mother. Depriving mother will not feed him or her immediately when she is getting supper ready and when she says he or she may not climb the inviting bookshelves or paint on the couch.

These are everyday examples and they are meant to be prosaic, for they illustrate the growing areas of daily conflict and questioning each child experiences. D. W. Winnicott, the English pediatrician-psychoanalyst, has written about this stage and calls it the fall from grace. A more complex reality now confronts the child, and the conflict between good and bad has to be resolved.

This developmental stage helps us understand the appeal of the fantasy stories of the bad witch who threatens destruction and the good fairy godmother who comes to save. These stories allow the child again, in fantasy life, to separate good mother and bad mother; bad witch is bad, and the child can feel very angry at her;

good fairy godmother saves the child, and he or she can feel very happy, of course.

Clearly at this time, the child must also learn to master muscular control because he or she is now subject to outer, social demands. Thus toilet training becomes an exemplar of the child's growing separation and budding socialization. How the parents handle this task and this whole developmental period will, to a great extent, determine a child's inner sense of personal mastery over his or her actions.

If the parents use force and shame in order to make a child conform to their demands, they will lay the seeds for a child's fear of his or her desire for separation. What is more tragic, the use of force and shame may motivate a child to store up anger and rage. The experience of personal respect and self-mastery is essential for what psychoanalysis call individuation. Only when a person has reached this level of development will his or her responses, particularly to parents, be rooted in a sense of self-worth rather than be motivated by fear of outer authority.

In the third stage, between the ages of three and five-and-a-half, the child is confronted with a new developmental task: he or she deepens and begins to integrate, in some basic sense, his or her social role and, in a rudimentary sense, his or her sexual identity.

In understanding this, it will be helpful to keep in mind the following points: a male child becomes increasingly aware of and emotionally preoccupied with the fact that mother, who has taken care of him and been the primary source of his physical and emotional life, is not completely his; that mother belongs to father; that somehow mother and father have something that is quite special; that he is only a little boy and someday he will be a man himself. The same is true, in broad outline, for the young girl and her desires for father's attention.

However, a young child does not fully grasp all these social and personal dimensions, for they entail the emotional recognition of extreme dependency. A child at

this period is increasingly aware of the differences between male and female, and is curious to find out what this means. If the parents can understand their child's doubts and questions in this area and are not negative or too prohibiting; if the parents themselves can live at ease with their own social role and their sexual identity, then the child will be convinced - not necessarily just through verbal communication - that initiatives, in the sense of curiosity and self-assertion, are good experiences.

The desire, for a male child, to have mother all to oneself-is going to be frustrated; it must be. But it does not have to bring with it a sense of hopeless guilt. One can have initiative without being burdened with the guilt of having done something wrong. If parents avoid the use of guilt and encourage and accept initiative, then a child will be prepared to accept him- or herself and need not repress all the turbulent emotions he or she may feel. Each individual's recognition of his or her social and sexual role lays the foundation for the capacity, in later life, to find models to pattern oneself by and to find a love partner.

If guilt predominates, however, a person will live with a deep-rooted distrust of his or her own sexuality and an ever-ready predisposition to fear retaliation. In later life, the sources of this fear will be locked in the unconscious, and the only sign of them will be a lessening of personal autonomy (freedom) manifested, for example, by difficulty in stabilizing sexual impulses. More broadly, the capacity to direct one's life with purpose, to manifest self-worth and personal strength, particularly when dealing with authority structures, will be defective.

If these tasks of social role and sexual identity are not resolved positively, a person will find that he or she is not able emotionally to accept their personal history. Without the internal strength of secure social and sexual identity, an individual rages against dependency, either overtly or subtly. When a person is reconciled to his or her personal history, s/he can

gain from it a sense of self that can enable him or her to be creative, to live a unique life cycle that neither his nor her parents could live.

The next stage, roughly from six or seven to eleven or twelve in Western society, is the tool-learning time for the growing person. If s/he lives in a highly literate society such as ours, s/he learns reading and writing, for our primary tools are words. Grammar school comes at a period when the struggle—described before, for a social role and sexual identity reaches a plateau—becomes latent. (It will come back with much more force in adolescence.) This latency period allows each individual to develop skills in the use of tools apart from the immediate pressure of community tasks and sexual needs.

Throughout one's life, there is a cumulative effect of all the strengths a person has integrated. Thus, at this stage, if a child has basic trust and initiative, if his or her sense of self-worth is positive, if authority was limiting but not oppressive, he or she will not be afraid to submit to the authority of learning.

A person can never learn if he or she is not willing to submit; yet if submission is too dangerous, if it is too threatening, a child will feel compelled *not* to learn. Many of the learning difficulties children experience in grammar school, in particular, stem from problems with their experience of their own autonomy. The happy combination of self-worth and response to teaching authority is not present and school becomes, consequently, a source of anxiety.

Unless both school and teachers are particularly responsive to an individual's needs, they may unknowingly confirm a sense of inferiority rather than foster a sense of personal competence. Erikson suggests that learning is both dexterity in using tools and self-satisfaction and pride in the using of them. Without some sense of joy, learning becomes impossible and thus the possibility of freedom, in the sense of personal autonomy, illusory.

The next stage is that of puberty and adolescence. During adolescence many psychological currents converge.

Sexual and aggressive strivings compete with each other to stabilize personal individuation and identity. The developmental task for this stage is to integrate the past, to assess the present and to plan for the future. Identity develops as the adolescent stabilizes and negotiates his or her internal awareness. This is achieved by a progressively developing correlation between one's own self-understanding and the community's response. That is, identity depends not only on a person's internal self-image but also on how the community of family, friends and teachers, for example, both affirms and confirms him or her.

In integrating drives, ambitions, capacities, an adolescent draws on all the ego strengths - trust, autonomy, initiative, industry - that have affected him/her throughout life. Where these strengths can come to the fore in the process of self-organization, a positive cohesive identity is forming and with it the psychological prerequisites for personal autonomy and for freedom are being solidified.

When this does not occur, we have what Erikson refers to as identity diffusion—the psyche draws primarily on the elements of inferiority, guilt, shame and distrust, all of which are also the common inheritance of everyone. When these factors, however, are in ascendancy, when they predominate, they lead to a negative identity manifested frequently in juvenile delinquency, or in sexual practices where an individual has lost his or her sense of self-respect.

The next stage Erikson calls young adulthood. It begins around the age of nineteen to twenty-one. If a young adult has stabilized his or her identity, recognized his or her social functions and resolved any sexual ambivalence, he or she will be capable of experiencing intimacy and thus of relating with another person. The capacity and the strength to love is the fruit of all these prior stages. To have this strength, one has to be at relative peace with oneself and be able to listen to as well as respond to others.

The philosopher, Martin Buber, speaks of this capacity when he says that all life is a meeting. If all of life is a meeting, one must be able to hear the other person, not use him or her as a sounding board, but hear a person's tears, laughter, joys and sorrows. If one is able to do that, then intimacy becomes possible. As a young adult – emerging from the turbulence of adolescence – can name him-/herself, as it were, as his or her autonomy is secured, intimacy is not threatening.

Intimacy must be possible with one person, one love choice, before one is capable of caring for many others. If an individual has achieved the strength of intimacy, this indicates an essential prerequisite for personal freedom. When a couple, for example, has a marriage based on love, intimacy is both its source as well as its goal.

Personal identity is a growing, deepening life experience. When, for example, personal identity has not been broadened to include intimacy, it contracts and isolation comes to the fore. In isolation, there is inner loneliness, for then a person is unable to find him or herself.

We can now consider adulthood, Erikson's seventh stage. It ranges from twenty-eighth or thirty to forty-five or fifty. In adulthood the way of finding oneself and of broadening one's identity is expressed through *generativity*. This is Erikson's word, and in using it he intends to include in its definition the presence of generosity, productivity and creativity. That is, the capacity to care for the works of one's hands, to care for the works of others, to care for what been generated out of love, necessity or even accident.

Generativity implies the capacity to accept responsibility, to be able to care for children, if one's life is a family life, to give to them with generosity and not to fear that the giving is a self-depletion. In adulthood, one should be able to encounter responsibility as human task, not as a burden that is confining. Generativity implies a growing appreciation of one's uniqueness, not in the sense of neurotic specialness, but because caring for others, as well as for oneself, stamps

an individual life cycle with the seal of a mature personal history. Life gives each person the task of integrating his or her past and resolving it with the present.

When generativity is absent, stagnation fills the void. Stagnation comes about in a family, for example, where there is little love; when the couple are just living alongside of each other, as it were, rather than with each other; when the children are raised more in terms of the family as an institution rather than as a community. It can also manifest itself in other ways: when a person, for example, becomes so isolated that he or she no longer dialogues, as it were, with the tragic in life. Such isolation keeps a person from experiencing others needs, pain or sorrow..

The last stage is maturity, and its particular strength should be wisdom. *Wisdom*, Erikson notes, *is the detached concern with life itself in the face of death itself. It responds to the needs of the oncoming generation for an integrated heritage and yet remains aware of the relativity of all knowledge.* This implies that the experience of the self has been unified enough so that one can emotionally accept one's personal life as well as death, and all that death implies. Integrity, which is the foundation of wisdom, comes from struggling to live as meaningfully as one can, given one's historical background.

In order to give to the oncoming generation, one must have self-worth – and wisdom flows from a sense of self-worth – without the need to make one's personal lifestyle the norm for others. For it is a pretense of personal omnipotence if others have to conform to the life one has led. Wisdom is not intimidated by someone else's vision, but trusts its own, knowing that one must live by the vision one has. To appreciate and to try to answer the needs of the oncoming generation, to share whatever truth one has found and, as Erikson indicates, in the sharing of it to find the truth anew – all this is the task and role of wisdom.

Despair is the worst harvest of a personal life; it is to die without knowing who one is, not having a name, as it were, by which to call oneself. Not reaching others, one loses grasp of oneself.

Having discussed the growth of the self through its developmental tasks, we have in actuality also studied the process of "freed will" and thus of the presence of those conditions which make the adjective "free" meaningful.

Freedom is a statement about the conditions of things, as it were; it entails a balance between unconscious conflict and conscious emotional self-direction, for everyone's actions are multi-determined. To repeat, freedom is not a state that one arrives at. Its possibilities vary in different circumstances. For instance, one may have reasonable autonomy in one's professional life, and yet be reduced to childlike emotional interaction when dealing with one's father or mother.

What the above discussion should also highlight is that the way parents respond to their young child will, to a significant extent, determine a person's capacity to experience freedom. If a child is raised without tyranny, without fear, without shame, without guilt, then they can have a sense of mature self-worth.

If one responds to a child in a tyrannical manner, imposing arbitrary rules and coercive fear, he or she will only be able to experience him-/herself and the world accordingly. If such occurs, *freed-will* will never come into being - one's "will" will be bound in self-hatred and inner rage. For in such cases, the children have been robbed of personal identity and their "will" will not be liberated until they find their own inner name.

The inner strengths of the self - to love, to care, and to seek wisdom - are the assurance of the capacity to name oneself, the essence of freedom. They reflect what Freud, defining a mature person, said: He should be able both *to love and to work*.