

## **Developmental tasks of early adulthood – transitions in University life – an inner world perspective.**

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### *Introduction*

*I want to start with a brief personal anecdote. I arrived in Sheffield last night and made my way to the B and B which had been booked for me. I was shown to an attractive room on the top floor of the house...an attic room not unlike the one I first lived in when I first went to college at the age of 18. Because of the topic of this talk, I was immediately reminded of the extreme anxiety I had experienced on that earlier occasion. My response to these memories last night was to turn on the television and reach for my mobile phone. Neither of these options had been available to me 40 year ago...and I will return to this later in my talk.*

*This morning at breakfast, I spotted a souvenir plate on the wall “Memories of Leek”. I rushed to ask my hostess whether she came from Leek and we spent a happy few minutes comparing notes about the home town we have in common...born in the same year, going to neighbouring schools, remembering favourite landmarks and local characters. I felt hugely reassured...grounded in this unfamiliar city.*

In this paper, I am not going to be talking from a clinical perspective but am going to give an overview of the developmental tasks which face older adolescents...young adults...and will attempt to locate these internal struggles in a contemporary context.

A few years ago I was involved in partnership negotiations with a modern university. Step one was to see what kind of accommodation would be available and a tour of the campus was arranged. It was a shock to walk into a modern, noisy, colourful building which I immediately identified as being rather like Terminal Five at Heathrow. Computer screens offered information about what was going on that day...notices being interspersed with adverts from companies who were presumably sponsoring the technology. A Costa Coffee outlet occupied much of the ground floor and there were Wireless hotspots and free internet access points all around, as well as a hub for charging mobile phones. Three different "eateries" were signposted, as was the university supermarket and bookshop. An insurance company had a stand in one corner...a bank in another...and university societies and sports teams were recruiting in every other available space. Our guide proudly showed us the state-of-the-art library and we were told several times that this facility was open 24/7. The library was amazingly quiet, whilst hundreds of students were milling around in the corridors and lift halls outside.

When we were shown a potential base room, we were disappointed to find that there would be no space for the students, no kitchen facility...indeed we were told that kettles were expressly forbidden. Room bookings were computerised and there was no such thing as block booking. I naively asked how we could make sure we met up with students we needed to see individually or who needed to see one of us? The guide gave me a weary look and said "You Text them of course."

It was difficult to convey just how dramatic a change of culture this would be for postgraduate students who are of the parental or grandparental generations and who value coming together as a group in a quiet space...and who certainly could not do justice to 24/7 library access!

This experience came back to me as I was preparing today's talk. I found myself pondering on how much things have changed since I went to university in 1969. I concluded that the fundamental developmental tasks involved in making the transitions in and out of higher education remain the same...but the context is very different. I want to say a little about the ways in which it is different...and in my view, even more difficult for students today...but first I will outline what I am describing as developmental tasks and say something of the theoretical framework within which I am locating this internal perspective.

Going to college or university is the last of the major transitions in the journey through formal education. The first, the move from home to nursery or infant school is arguably the most challenging but I think the move into higher education has much in common with that first transition and certainly comes a close second in terms of what Alex Coren calls "pressure on internal coherence."

Elsa Bell will talk in more detail about the development of "internal coherence"...what I would call, from my psychoanalytic perspective, robust, flexible internal objects. Whether you share a psychoanalytic model or prefer an attachment theory approach, we are all agreed that transitions throughout life build on the experience of transitions into new developmental phases in infancy and early childhood.

Psychoanalytic literature would suggest that the experience of birth is the first, hugely significant transition from one state of being to another. Infants arrive with more or less ease into a world which is entirely strange to them. They are bombarded by sounds and sensations and do not have the apparatus to make sense of them. At this point, they are completely dependent on the people who greet them and care for them. They begin a journey through infancy and childhood which is a complex interaction between their natural endowment (personality and genetic inheritance) and their environment. From the moment of birth, (and indeed, in utero) babies differ. Some are vigorous and protesting,

others are passive and uncomplaining. It is not simply a matter of some parents being “better” at parenting than others. Some babies allow themselves to be parented and some make it extremely difficult. The child who is fortunate enough to make a good “fit” with his mother or primary caregiver in the early months is likely to be better able to manage his first experiences of separation and thereafter, to learn.

The experience of weaning (by which I mean the move from the intimate feeding relationship whether it be breast or bottle) is often identified as the prototype for later experiences of separation. After weaning may come greater and more prolonged separations, with mothers going out, introducing alternative caregivers into the home, returning to work, leaving their child with a child minder or in a nursery. If you watch a small toddler who has experienced a well-negotiated separation and who has been introduced to the world in careful stages, you will usually see him making more and more adventurous forays away from his mother to explore his surroundings. At first, he goes back often, for a cuddle or for verbal reassurance. As time goes on, he learns that she is still there on his return and he moves a little further away, perhaps looking back over his shoulder to check, but not needing to be in such close physical proximity. The child who has been led to believe that the world is a welcoming and fascinating place will be eager to explore it, so long as his secure base is there for him to return to.

This pattern does not really change as life and development move on. We all rely on a secure base to return to. Psychoanalytic thinking would suggest that the secure base, as one moves through childhood and towards adulthood is increasingly, an *internal* phenomenon. Experiences of containment and of well-managed separations are internalized; introjected in a way which provides the individual with a good internal object, a secure and flexible inner world.

These ordinary transitions are managed reasonably smoothly by most families in most circumstances....but no transition can be achieved without a measure of

anxiety; involving, as they do, both an ending and a beginning. There are losses and gains, hopes and fears. A psychoanalytic theory of learning would suggest that anxiety is a necessary spur to learning. If separation from the primary caregiver is avoided, the child never has to struggle with a gap...never experiences hunger or frustration, never learns to wait or to be alone...never needs to tackle new tasks or learn new skills. I am, of course, talking about manageable doses of anxiety ...not about the overwhelming, primitive fear which can interfere with learning and development and which can get stirred up at times of change and transition.

I was talking last week to a student who is coming to the end of a four year postgraduate training course and who is feeling overcome by anxiety about the future. She is leaving a course she has loved and feels she is facing an abyss. Her words were "I can't see any continuity." The connection between her student self and the rest of her professional life was temporarily severed in her mind. This is somebody with a significant career behind her and an enriched career ahead...she has a network of connections and knows how, when and why she will be in touch with many of us in the future. But in the moment, overwhelmed by feelings of loss, she lost touch with what she knows...a primitive internal experience interfered with her capacity for thought. When her upset subsided, she was able to laugh at herself a little and when I told her about this talk she suggested cheerfully that I could use her as an example.

This is the kind of anxiety which most of us, most of the time, are not in touch with. It is often described in psychoanalytic circles as catastrophic anxiety...anxiety about annihilation and death...no sense of going on being. We actively defend ourselves against it but the risks are always there at times of change and transition.

I do not want to suggest that good early experience of nurturing relationships and careful transitions acts as a failsafe vaccination against future disturbance but it

is self evident that it gives the individual a better chance of remaining stable through periods of stress. Nor do I want to underestimate the potentially devastating effect of real life trauma...family breakdown, parental addiction, neglect, abuse, illness, accident, dislocation etc. I also do not want to underestimate the significance of characterological differences.

To return to the ordinary, “good enough” early experience. The child entering nursery or infant school is taking a first step into the outside world. For what feel like long periods of time, they are away from the familiar surroundings of home and have to believe that they have not dropped out of the mind of their mother...who is at work, at home with other children or, in phantasy, at home with daddy making new babies. In school, they have to find a place amongst many others, sharing space, toys, equipment and most significantly, sharing the attention of the teacher and classroom helpers. The degree to which they are able to manage all this will depend on the individual and, of course, on the capacity of the school to respond sensitively. By the time children move on to secondary school, they have, in most cases, come to terms with many of these realities. However, secondary transfer is recognised as one of the points of vulnerability in a child’s developmental journey. The relative anonymity of life in secondary school, the numbers, the noise, the complexity of the timetable and the constant changes of classroom and teacher all put pressure on the individual and anxiety levels are high until the unfamiliar becomes familiar. Many eleven year olds are articulate about how threatened they felt when starting secondary school...the fears they speak of are reminiscent of the experience of starting nursery...they fear getting lost, not finding the toilets, not being able to eat the lunch, having no friends, being bullied...being found to be stupid...and so on.

The challenge of secondary education is exacerbated by the challenges of puberty and adolescence and this process is rarely completed when the young person moves on again, whether it be into the world of work or into further study. In the later stages of adolescence, the adult world beckons and decisions have to

be made about work, about higher education and about sexuality and couple relationships. The group life which has dominated in earlier adolescence gives way to some extent and young people begin to think more seriously about their own futures and their own identity. The “gap year” for adolescents going on to higher education is an interesting phenomenon. In fact it is used in very different ways. For some it is a profoundly adolescent experience, a reward for the perceived privations of school life and study and an opportunity to be relatively irresponsible, adventurous and self indulgent. For others it offers a taste of the adult world of work and wages before returning to student life; a life which is sometimes viewed (by adults) as prolonging adolescent indulgence. It is interesting the way adults look at students...usually with a genuine mixture of envy and pity; pity for the pain and self doubt which is an inevitable part of growing up... and envy of the energy, creativity and freedom which students enjoy. I think it is important to remind ourselves that when we look at the negative aspects of change, we should take care not to ignore the energizing effects of new opportunities and new beginnings.

So what am I identifying as the internal tasks facing the university or college student? Margot Waddell refers to the need to become one’s own parent by which she means that the adolescent has to relinquish dependency on external parental figures and rely on his internal parents...what psychoanalysis calls his internal objects. The first challenge generally comes with the selection process, carrying as it does a heavy load of implicit success and failure. The self questioning at this point goes to the heart of the matter and resonates with conscious and unconscious memories of earlier beginnings. Will they want me? Am I good enough? Can I cope? Am I making the right choices? Will my exam results be convincing? What if everybody rejects me? These fears rarely correspond to reality with students being unnecessarily pessimistic or full of bravado when actually, they stand very little chance of getting a place.

Being accepted, or deciding to take up one offer rather than another, is felt to be a life shaping choice; as is the choice of how big a geog distance to move from home and what kind of accommodation to live in. Even at this moment of success, there are losses to be dealt with. If you go to one university it means you won't go to another...if you take one course, you won't take another. Being rejected presents the individual with a different kind of challenge and the internal capacity to bear the emotional pain will be sorely tested. It is likely that at this stage, the young person's parent will be standing by to offer support and reassurance. Once the university career is underway, the student is faced with having to manage so many experiences alone. He has to make his own choices and decide upon his own boundaries. Suddenly, there is nobody telling him that he cannot stay out late every night of the week, no parent reminding him to change his clothes, to eat a sensible meal or to have a bath. He is old enough to buy alcohol legally, to go into clubs. Nobody (at least no parental figure) knows if he is drinking too much, if he sleeps with his girlfriend or if he neglects his work. Tutors will know if he is not turning up for tutorials but may not know how many lectures he is missing or whether he is actually too tired or depressed to take in what he is hearing. Most students relish this new freedom with a part of themselves but with another, may feel a profound sense of loneliness and loss. Students attending therapeutic or counseling services at this time often talk about how shocking it is to have the feeling that nobody notices what they are doing and nobody knows them.

The kind of drunken bonanza which for many students characterizes fresher's week may be a celebration of new found freedom but it is also a way of anaesthetizing oneself against feeling the loss of home and school...or fear of the future.

When further stress points occur....exams, relationship breakdowns, illness and so on, the student is expected to be adult enough to cope. At the same time, they are cushioned from many of the pressures of the adult, working world.

University life is a kind of “in between” place...where you are free to behave like an adolescent but from which you are expected to emerge as a responsible adult.

Just a brief word about the transition to adulthood...which we tend to believe coincides with graduating and leaving university. Freud defined an adult as someone who is able to work and able to love. Melanie Klein described it in terms of the individual spending more time in what she called “the depressive position” ....a state of mind in which the individual can tolerate love and hate without splitting (in other words can manage ambivalence) and in which he can feel regret and concern for others. Wilfred Bion took it further...suggesting that adulthood involves being able to go on learning and developing.

I want to return to my description of a modern university campus and my slightly provocative statement about the internal work of separation being more difficult now than it was when I went to college. I am in danger of sounding like a “grumpy old woman” but I actually want to stimulate some real debate about the impact of modern technological advances on the internal work of separation. I have watched with interest as we (myself included) have developed a societal acceptance...indeed a reliance...on mobile phones, email and social networking sights. We have come to expect that we can make instant contact...regardless of distance. It is also relatively cheap to do so. When I went to college, the weekly call home was expensive and when I traveled around France one summer, there was no expectation that I would make a call...except in an emergency. Postcard Young people today live in a digital world...and I think it has brought with it, disadvantages as well as advantages. We are all less able to wait than once we were...we don't manage frustration well. If our computer network is down, our battery flat or our phone out of range, we complain that we are out of touch! Email has led us to expect almost immediate responses...gone are the days of watching anxiously for the post...wondering whether we will receive a reply or whether our own letter ever reached the recipient. These

doubts still exist but all is revealed much more quickly...waiting times are much shorter! We have less and less practice at waiting and having to bear “not knowing.”

I have been preoccupied for some years in watching the way in which mobile phones are used at airports and in trains. Couples say goodbye at the barrier...then say it again as soon as their loved one is on the train. They often remain in touch throughout the journey...checking on what each other is doing, eating, reading and so on! When a plane lands, just watch how many passengers reach for their phones, turning them on in spite of the request that they wait until they get into the terminal building. I don't think this is just a matter of wanting to let one's loved ones know one has arrived...I think it is wanting to let them...and yourself...know that you have survived! The anxiety about flying, the pain of separation or anticipation of reunion is wiped out by the quick call. Phones may be a huge convenience but they have undoubtedly distorted our management of separations...of waiting...of not knowing. My argument is that we often use technology defensively...to avoid an internal experience of uncertainty or aloneness...or the primitive terror of death. We also use them to avoid minor discomforts. How many of us, for example, reach for our phones to check for messages at awkward moments in meetings? Or to alleviate moments of boredom? Young people use electronic games to distract themselves...to pass time, to avoid becoming aware of feelings of fear or uncertainty. There have always been a thousand ways of distracting oneself from work which is waiting to be done...but the electronic device is ever- available and can quickly absorb the anxious individual.

For the young person who is leaving school and moving away from home, mobile phones, email and Facebook can change the nature of the experience. Carrying your mother's mobile phone on your first excursion away from home may be reassuring...somewhat akin to using it as a transitional object to remind you of your mother's love and concern. But this is rather different from the way in which

most 18 year olds use their phones. Their parents' anxious call may be more or less welcome, depending on whether they need to feel remembered in this way or whether they want to break free, secure in the knowledge that their parents are thinking about them and can be contacted if necessary. I recently spent time with a mother who called her daughter three times the day before her finals and again in the morning just as the girl was going into the exam room. Of course, I can see that this kind of support may be necessary for some students at some points in their careers but I was not sure whether it was really my friend who needed the reassurance that her daughter was coping

Going away to university used to mean leaving one's peer group behind, often making extravagant promises to meet up again in the first vacation and never to forget each other. With modern technology, students can stay in touch in spite of being separated...daily postings on Facebook or MySpace show old friends the new friends you are making. Photos can be sent by email or by phone. Social networking allows young people to accumulate more and more "friends" to have the fantasy that they can "delete" contacts at will and endlessly "move on."

As you can see from the way I am talking, I veer towards feeling that the defensive use of these channels of communication creates some difficulties. Rather like the notion of the "too good mother" who anticipates her baby's every need and does not allow any experience of hunger or frustration, the digital age can create the illusion that you need never be alone. I was fascinated to watch an interview with Wayne Rooney at the weekend. When asked what it was like working under Mr Capello, Wayne said that he was very strict...he makes them wear tracksuits at mealtimes and they cannot leave the table until everyone has finished. He added, "...and we can't take our phones to meals." It was clear that he found this last rule particularly shocking...a prohibition on making contact outside the immediate circle of players and coaching staff. The idea that you might need to do one thing at a time seemed foreign to him.

One last thought about these electronic retreats. We know that they are used by some adolescents to make others feel excluded. Cyber bullying is on the increase amongst younger adolescents. I think there is a danger that feeling excluded from these lines of communication leaves young people adrift from their peer group and is yet another demarcation between the successful, popular student and the one who is struggling. What if you have no friends to text, no parents to telephone, no photos of interest to post on the web? These individuals can become isolated and depressed or may take up “positions” about not joining in...the kind of narcissistic glorification of being a loner which is deeply worrying and which seems to be behind some sudden outbreaks of violence such as in the college shootings. There are also individuals who commune only with their computers...cutting out almost all real human contact...and here I am reminded of the young man who hacked into the Pentagon system...just because he could!

I need to make clear that I am not a total Luddite. . I recognize that the mobile device is invaluable in keeping young people safe or enabling them to alert others when they are in danger. I am as dependent as anyone on email, I love Googling quickly to deal with areas of ignorance or lapses of memory and I have learned that the only way to make contact with some young patients is by text...but I do think there are implications we need to address. The electronic revolution has, to date, had most impact on young people and therefore as yet not so much on parents. However, we do now see young patients who use the phone in the consulting room to interrupt trains of thought and as an escape route from painful topics. I have also worked with young mothers who interrupt the baby’s feed...and our conversation...to answer the phone or to call a cab for after the session so there is no wait. If we return to my starting point about each child’s need for an attentive, thoughtful carer who will help the child take the first tentative steps into the outside world and new relationships, you may agree with me that there is a problem if we educate generations who become used to instant answers, minimum struggle with frustration and ever available distractions

from emotional pain. Problems arise, not when electronic devices support and augment relationships, but when they replace relationships with real human beings.