



By Dr. Amitai Etzioni

Growing Up In A World Of Hard CHOICES

AN old Chinese proverb—or is it a curse?—reads: “May you live in interesting times.” The times for American youngsters may have become too interesting. There is a point beyond which the surfeit of options becomes overwhelming, the expansion of freedoms turns into anarchy; and the lack of clear moral standards, into a threatening vacuum.

Americans have long been indulged in such a threatening abundance in matters concerning consumer goods. We have gradually learned to come to terms with the myriad choices among goods, largely by ignoring most of them, often maintaining loyalties to a brand we have come to trust, and by recognizing there are few real differences among many “choices.”

However, in recent decades the avalanche of choices, and the lack of guidelines, has been extended from the realm of products to our personal, social, moral and even biological existence—issues that matter a great deal. The result is a challenge that is much more bewildering than any supermarket ever was. Take the matter of family relations and sex roles. The older generation, those who had to make lifelong commitments in the 1950s, had a clearer guide. Society expected men to work outside the household; women, by and large, were homemakers. Marriage and lifelong marriage was the ideal. Having children was idealized. True, not everyone lived up to all these expectations. Some women worked outside the home even in those days; some never married, and some found no joy in having children. However, they were relatively few and were seen by others, and often by themselves, as exceptions. It was, for most of us, quite clear what a person was supposed to do.

Today the confusion starts with trivial things, such as matters of manners, and extends much deeper. Do you hold the door open and step aside to allow a

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Bombarded by media blitzes, peer pressures, parental admonishments and contrasting life styles, many of today's young Americans are bewildered and confused. And for good reason.

woman to enter first, as a matter of good manners, or do you insult her as a weakling, by the very same act? How do you address a letter to a woman: Miss, Madam, Ms.? If you meet a couple who are introduced as having different last names, may you assume that they are not married to one another? And, if they do share the same last name, is it safe to assume they are still married.†

More seriously, is one to marry? Numerous young people defer marriage much longer than their elders used to; more do not marry at all; and many look at their marriage not as a life commitment but, in effect, as an arrangement that can, and frequently is, undone and redone. Quite often, undone and redone again. Having children is no longer an obvious choice. And work outside the home for mothers, even those with young infants, is only an option to be considered. Once the decision is made to accept employment, a follow-up decision must also be made concerning its importance. One may treat such work merely as a job, to take second seat to one's family duties, or as a career, often demanding top priority. In effect, every aspect of family life has become open to consideration, from the division of duties between husband and wife, to what is expected of children, to who gets to do what with the money earned.

The bewilderment depicted in matters of family is evident elsewhere. In the '50s you did all you could for your

loved ones. Once their hearts stopped beating, you leaned back sad and exhausted, but with the knowledge you lived up to your duty. Today, a young person is too frequently asked to participate in the heart-rending decision of whether to “pull the plug” and turn off the life-prolonging machines that have made death not an inevitable occurrence, but a guilt-ridden decision.

BIO-TECH advances already force many other burdensome choices, and many more are on the horizon. Instead of anticipating and welcoming their newborn with all of birth's inherent excitement, prospective parents can use well-established scientific techniques to determine if the fetus is afflicted with various illnesses and whether it is a boy or a girl. They face the awesome decision of whether to interrupt the pregnancy if the test results are not to their choosing. Pro-life groups are sure about the answer; Pro-choice supporters raise the opposite possibility. Most youngsters are caught in the middle. Genetic engineering in future decades will multiply these dilemmas.

Whatever rules remain, teens feel an enormous pressure from their peers to break them. A study of youngsters found that pressure to disregard the rules set by their parents and the community was the strongest pressure experienced by children of all ages. It was particularly

NOW, WHERE?—The future for many American youths is less defined and more uncertain than it was for past generations. Few can look forward to improving their economic life the way their parents did.

moved from difficult economic times into the post-World War II explosion of affluence. However, the younger generation of Americans grew up in years of declining economic growth and rising inflation in the '70s. While in recent years the economy has done better, the growth rate remains anemic. By and large, young Americans cannot look forward to as much of an improvement in their economic lives as that which their parents achieved.

WHILE today's youth are severely challenged, and often seem ill-prepared for enormous problems they face, there are many recent positive signs of growing up and of coming to terms with a more demanding, less cozy America. Students do study harder although not necessarily hard. SAT scores stopped their decline and have begun to rise.

Illicit drugs and cigarette smoking have declined over the past five years. There are some signs that drinking to excess is losing its appeal. The age group of 18-24 years is much more opposed to pornography than the somewhat older groups of 25-29 and 30-34. Most consider raising a family to be among their "very important objectives." The group of young-

sters who feel that the use of marijuana should be legalized, a kind of permissiveness litmus test, fell from 53 percent in 1977 to 23 percent in 1984.

Much was made of a recent survey of young people who ranked among their top American heroes, movie actors, with Clint Eastwood in the lead. However, little attention has been paid to the many youngsters who added an unexpected, write-in candidate: *mothers*.

Patriotism is back. NROTC and ROTC are again quite acceptable even on those liberal campuses where they once were a source of controversy.

It is a confused, tough age, but there are signs that the present generation may be shaping up, able to handle the challenges of shifting values and the reconstruction of the American society in the process. □

fierce on those ages 13 to 15. Pressure to drink alcohol topped the list, followed closely by the requirement to smoke marijuana or cigarettes to be socially accepted. Engaging in sex and wearing the "right" clothes also ranked high.

The absence of guidelines, the notion that anything goes, far from being experienced by most young Americans as a joy of choice, comes across as moral anarchy. Little wonder those least able to deal with it, escape from it by joining various political, communal or religious cults that provide ultra-strong guidance. This absolute leadership is provided at the cost of surrender of personal independence and individual freedoms.

Many youngsters either flounder or flail about, while still others gradually find a way of life based on a return to a more traditional set of values.

All this has to be worked out while, in the background, sexually lurid lyrics of satanic and punk rock music blare at high decibels and TV messages flash by in rapid succession—all this on top of the threat of nuclear war. There is no reason to expect that deterrence, which has worked since the early '50s, will suddenly fail—and yet there is a gnawing sense of: Should I study, save, make long-term plans when any moment the whole world may go up in a cloud? (Fear of war was ranked, in an April 1985 Gallup poll of Americans, ages 18 to 24, as the problem of most concern, 12 times more than the fear of crime, seven times more than the fear of poverty.) And, how much trust can one put in one's elders, and in the world they built, if they cannot handle the "Big H?"

The older generation of Americans