

Getting Older Younger

When I first took a job teaching at a private Academy, one of the lunchroom workers skirted me from the teachers' to the students' line. He didn't believe I was the new English teacher until the head of the Math department nodded to him that it was true.

Recently I read an article by Alison Gopnik, a Berkeley psychology professor, suggesting that kids are getting older at a younger age (that is, they are physically maturing earlier), but also staying younger while getting older (that is, they socially mature less quickly). I can identify with that.

I remember seeing photos of my hometown's 1909 high school graduating class. The "kids" looked thirty years old to me. Even though they physically matured later than our current crop, they went out into the world earlier, earning a living or running a home, for which they had been preparing since they were children, making them appear more serious and thus more socially mature. That was what their upbringing was for.

Nowadays, at least during normal economic times, there is a greater ability to delay taking a job. Kids in school not only decide what they want to do, but when and if they want to do it. But even when jobs are scarce locally, nowadays the wider culture offers numerous types of jobs, locales where jobs exist, and training for those jobs.

Kids have more choices and often families have the wherewithal to allow their kids to put off those choices longer. Since parents and teachers have no clue what the kids will choose, they offer few specific apprenticing opportunities for their "Paduan learners". Today's kids learn a lot about a lot of things, to be sure, but they get little experience in any concentration. Often, their first actual "concentration" is their major in college and they may be poorly prepared, not for the intellectual challenge, but for the self-discipline that goes with the concentration.

Enter the martial arts. Traditional budo offers to every aging youth (the younger ones, the older ones, and the younger old ones) the experience of apprenticeship that has been lost in today's world.

From the 1970s to the 2000s, both young and old thrilled at the idea of being Obiwan Kenobi's apprentice, having a guide for a long period of skill-development, and gaining extraordinary personal and physical traits as a result, but once the movie was over, there seemed to be nowhere to learn light-saber fencing, to ride a tawn-tawn, or learn Jedi mind-control—nowhere to attain physical, mental and spiritual skills that could serve one in mature years while keeping one physically younger.

I like the idea of staying younger as I get older. Sure, I still have the remnants of injuries that make me a less hearty than when I was twenty-five, but I also am only five pounds heavier than when I was twenty-five. Sure, I can't run and jump like when I was a brown belt, but I can slip past those who can run and jump (at least most of the time) and take them down before they set a foot on the ground. There is no doubt in my mind that, having studied budo since I was seventeen, the investment paid off. But what about today's youth who are more physically mature than I was but less socially aware (and less able to judge what's best for them)?

In her article Professor Gopnik does not mention a corollary to the idea that youth is smarter earlier and wiser later: that today's kids reach the age of independence without having the wherewithal to prudently apply knowledge to life. As a result, they sample this, that, and the other thing rather than embrace the apparent sameness of apprenticeship that would make them expert at something. A Jack-of-all-trades and master of none does not a Jedi make.

Shall we then herd the young into dojo before they reach the age of independence under the penalty of no iPhone for a year if they resist? Or put them in the Wayback Machine so they can farm during the day and train under an Okinawan master at night? We can address these questions from three perspectives: that of a parent, that of a dojo owner, and that of a traditional martial artist.

Those perspectives will be discussed next time.