poses an impediment to identity formation. People don’t come out of nowhere, but we pretend we do.

The belief in self-creation is, very likely, one of the glories of American culture. It seems likely that in cultures where more of one’s identity is preordained and each individual need not start from scratch, some of the trials we associate with adolescence would disappear. Is that true? Do other cultures magnify other aspects of the maturation process? Are there some aspects of adolescence that we choose not to recognize? One way to approach these questions is to take a look at the way some other cultures think about what we assume to be problems inherent in adolescence.

THREE

Coming of Age in Utter Confusion

In the region [of Central Africa] where feminine beauty is all but identified with obesity, the girl at puberty is segregated, sometimes for years, fed with sweet and fatty foods, allowed no activity and her body rubbed assiduously with oils. She is taught during this time her future duties and her seclusion ends with a parade of her corpulence that is followed by her marriage to her proud bridegroom.

—RUTH BENEDICT, Patterns of Culture (1934)

Other cultures often look crazy from the outside. Benedict’s description of the “fattening house,” in which young women in their teens were treated like Strasbourg geese, seems bizarre and grotesque.

Here’s another scenario that may be even stranger. Throughout her teenage years, a young woman is bombarded with advertising for fatty snack foods, and she is constantly being asked, “Fries with that?” At the same time, she is told constantly that her future happiness depends on being extremely thin. This is the situation young women face in contemporary America. It’s an odd practice, but we tend not to think it so. It’s how we live.

The Central African practice, the expression of a “primitive” culture, had at least the virtue of being internally consistent. It prepared the young woman for the next stage of her life. The contemporary American practice has failure built into it. For the last twenty years or so, eating disorders have become epidemic among young women (and they have become more common among young men as well). Obesity is also increasing among people in their teens. Living in a junk food culture, their minds marinated in unrealistic images of what their bodies should be, contemporary teenagers must find a way to balance these powerful contradictions and develop a healthy sense of themselves.
Coming of Age in Utter Confusion

Such challenges are not inherent in either adolescent physiology or psychology. Rather, they are endemic to contemporary American culture. From inside the culture, such dilemmas come to seem inevitable. A culture is, after all, little more than a group of beliefs and practices that its members accept without very much thought. Those who fattened their daughters saw it as a step to marriage. We see adolescent confusion as an inescapable part of growing up.

We are, at the moment, especially prone to see our own beliefs about the young as universal because we are exporting our culture so aggressively. Teenager-like creatures are emerging in Kuala Lumpur, Bombay, Nairobi, and anywhere MTV and other media of mass persuasion beam from the sky. Remote “peoples,” untouched by the culture that creates teenagers, are far rarer now that they were early in the century when Benedict and other pioneering anthropologists were doing their work. (Because I’m talking largely about customs that were recorded before modernization became pervasive, I am using the past tense when describing them.)

Thus, examples like the one cited above, though distant in time and place, can be useful for thinking about contemporary teenagers. They illustrate the diversity of thinking among different peoples about what maturity is and how it should be recognized. Strange stories from exotic locales can provide perspectives on our own culture and its weird and painful practices.

The ways in which societies prepare young people to become adults and the rituals through which they are initiated express their cultures’ view of what it means to be a person—both as a member of the community and as an individual. Ceremonies are an opportunity to enact and reaffirm core values, and the acceptance of the young into full membership in the community is usually a significant event.

By contrast, becoming an adult is a highly ambiguous event in our own culture. We have many ceremonies of limited significance, such as religious confirmation, high school graduation and the senior prom, or going away to college—all of which seem to promise entry into the mainstream community, but actually lead to further periods of immaturity. These are accompanied by a welter of laws that confer adult privileges and responsibilities at various ages.

Some stepping-stones of maturity are established within families: old enough to be left home alone, old enough to pierce your ears (or whatever), old enough to date. Many other thresholds are set by society in the form of laws: old enough to drive, old enough to be a soldier, old enough to vote. And there are some gray areas where the official threshold seems out of sync with practice: old enough to drink, old enough to work, old enough to consent to sex.

Over the last 350 years in America, all of these thresholds have been moved back and forth many times as we have struggled with when and how the society should accept the young as full members. We seemed, during the 1960s and 1970s, to be moving toward standardizing legal adulthood at eighteen. Since then, however, some age restrictions have been extended upward to twenty-one, while the age at which one can be tried and punished as an adult has been getting steadily younger. And curfews for young people, which had largely disappeared, have been revived.

Benedict argued that coming-of-age ceremonies, where they exist, enact what it means to be an adult in that culture. Perhaps because most American adults see themselves as still young, we are particularly reluctant to acknowledge the maturity of our children.

An ironic result is that age limits established to keep young people from endangering themselves—such as minimum ages for drinking liquor, smoking cigarettes, and gambling legally—become important passages to maturity. The mark of adulthood in America is the license to indulge in bad habits.

While we have no way of telling when a young person is truly grown up, there are a couple of things we are pretty sure we know about teenagers. The conventional wisdom has it that we can expect trouble: Being a teenager is an ordeal, and being the parent of a teenager is even worse. Such wisdom also has it that teenagers are a distinct group unto themselves, no longer children yet not adult, whose time is best spent in institutions and settings populated almost exclusively by people their own age.

Ours is not the only society that has acted on these beliefs. Indeed, the segregation of young people from the rest of the society was observed by researchers in Africa even before it became commonplace in the United States. Still, neither of these tenets of conventional wisdom is true for all, or even most, cultures. The diversity of human behavior is amazing. What many societies suppress—sex between boys and teenage males, bestiality, premarital pregnancy—others celebrate.
Woman's maturity is frequently tied to her body, while man's is defined by the role he will play in society. While menstruation is an involuntary event that often triggers initiation rituals for females that lead quickly to marriage, there is latitude to judge the maturity of a male. One North American tribe placed the triggering point for a boy's initiation as the first time he dreamed of an arrow, a boat, or a woman. Because this event was unverifiable, the young man's family could manipulate it to suit their convenience.

In nearly all the societies we know about, people pass through distinct times of life. But the timing of these transitions, the activities that mark them, and the meaning attributed to them differ dramatically from one culture to another. In some tribes, the initiation into adulthood comes at ten years old or even younger, while others demand that young people be nearly twice as old. Some move directly from childhood to full adulthood with only a few weeks or months of intermediate steps, while for others, the transition can last more than a decade. Indeed, this very variation demonstrates the maturity is first and foremost a social phenomenon and only secondarily a biological one.

One anthropological term that has become part of our vocabulary for talking about the young is “rites of passage.” This phenomenon was first named and described by Arnold van Gennep in a work published in French in 1908. For van Gennep, adolescent initiation was only one of many rites of passage found in numerous societies, all of which follow a three-part scheme. First, individuals are separated from their everyday life and surroundings. Then they undergo some period of transition that can last minutes or years. Finally, they are reintroduced to normal life, but their role is new and others look upon them differently.

The middle phase, that of being neither here nor there, is the most provocative and the most mysterious. You have left one realm, but you have not yet entered another. Anthropologists call this state “liminality,” a word derived from the Latin word for threshold. In some initiation rites, the threshold is literal—a gate to be walked through, a portal to be entered.

A person standing at such a threshold must be invited to come through the door. But those with the power to extend the invitation are often ambivalent about surrendering their authority over the young people at the gate and welcoming them into the circle of adults. The young people, for their part, wait at the threshold because they fundamentally accept the values of the society of which they expect to become full members. But sometimes they are kept waiting at this door for years, and they must force elders to finally accept their claim to adulthood.

The inability to classify someone in this in-between state implies a kind of social invisibility. It might sound like a nightmare right out of Kafka. Nevertheless, this state of liminality can be a uniquely privileged moment in one's life, one in which behavior denied to either children or adults is tolerated, or even expected. Because the young people are not quite visible, and certainly not fathomable, adults avert their eyes from what they do. Theft, rowdy and violent behavior, and sexual activity that would ordinarily not be tolerated are condoned. Many initiation rituals incorporate cross-dressing between the sexes, a final moment of ambiguity before sex roles become fixed.

In our own society, liminality is what makes much of youth culture possible. For example, parents tell their young children how to dress and set standards for one another. But they understand that they can't control the dress of their teenage offspring, who are free to adopt transgressive, provocative costumes they won't be allowed at any other time of life. Similarly, because adults assume that they cannot understand teenagers' music or humor, most simply don't pay any attention. They thus abdicate entire realms of expression to young people saying rude, though not very mysterious, things. Young people seem to rule popular culture worldwide, yet they get much of that power, paradoxically, because the majority of people ignore those media they are perceived to dominate.

When we say, “I just don't understand teenagers,” we are echoing what adults have said in most times and places about people who were no longer children but not yet adults. The same is true when we tolerate rowdy or reckless behavior from teens that would be more likely to be punished if a child or adult did it. And the fear and panic that periodically overtake society's thinking about the young must contain some echo of the emotion people felt when they banished their young, either symbolically or literally, to the wilderness. The desire by families and villages to see their young safely through this threatening and perilous state often requires huge expenditures of wealth. That's something that parents paying their children's college bills can relate to.

In many times and places, the transition from childhood to adulthood has meant literal banishment from the family, whether into the wilderness, another household, or perhaps boarding school. Our own most common ritual of physical separation—sending the kids off to college—
comes later in life than is typical in most societies. But, like banishment practices in other societies, those who participate in it, both old and young, feel that it is necessary. And both generations believe that when young people return from the banishment, they will be changed in ways that allow parents and children to view each other as fellow adults.

Several American Indian tribes followed a practice of voluntary banishment called the vision quest. Unlike most initiation rites, this was entirely solitary and self-administered. The young man would leave the group, go to a distant and perhaps sacred place, fast for several days, and wait for dreams or visions that would affirm that a guardian spirit has entered his life. Then he would return to his people, a new man, guided no longer by his family but by the spirit he had found on his quest.

The vision quest has great appeal to contemporary North Americans, not simply because it happened here, but because it seems a precursor to our individualistic culture. Moreover, it is associated with the kind of deep learning that parents know they cannot provide, but which our culture assumes will be provided by higher education. We also count on schooling to provide skills for earning a living that are infinitely more complicated than those needed by the nomadic participant in a vision quest.

The great appeal of the vision quest lies in its simplicity and brevity. Coming of age in contemporary North America is, by contrast, a procedure of mind-boggling complexity and seemingly endless duration. The banishment involved is sometimes virtual, sometimes literal, but always ambiguous.

We share the conviction of many tribal societies that the years immediately after puberty are a very dangerous age, and young women’s sexuality is particularly threatening. This is true, though we do not go to the lengths that Benedict described among the Carrier tribe in British Columbia early in the twentieth century: “Her three or four years of seclusion was called ‘the burying alive’ and she lived for all that time alone in the wilderness, in a hut of branches far from all beaten trails. She was a threat to any person who might so much as catch a glimpse of her, and her mere footstep defiled a path or a river. . . . She was herself in danger and she was a source of danger to everyone else.”

One senses in that story both a relatively common fear of young women’s sexuality, and even more strongly, a terror of fertility itself among people trying to survive in a harsh climate. Perhaps contemporary fears about scarcity, environmental pollution, and overpopulation are fueling a similar reaction against the fertility of young females that places teenage mothers among our foremost contemporary social villains.

“Girls are very dangerous at that time,” wrote Maria Chono of Mexico’s Papago tribe about the time of her first menstruation in the early 1860s. “If they touch a man’s bow, or even look at it, the bow will not shoot anymore. If they drink out of a man’s bowl, it will make him sick. If they touch a man himself, he might fall down dead.” She was placed by herself in a small house, where she could not stand up, and was forbidden even to touch her own hair. After four days in this house, she was considered purified, and she was brought back to the village for fasting and ritual singing and dancing. Then when the moon was in the same phase as when it started, she was given a bath by the medicine man, a feast, and a new name. “It was over,” she wrote. “I looked like half of myself. All my clothes were gone. All our dried corn and beans were eaten up. But I was grown up.”

The declared dangers of young women were similar in the British Columbian and Mexican examples. But one tribe subjected the young woman to a life-threatening, four-year ordeal, while the other engaged in a month of ceremonies. The Carrier’s fears brought suffering to their young, while the Papago ritualized their fears, then moved on. Contemporary America, with its many weak and inconclusive rituals, offers no clear recognition of the end of youth and the beginning of maturity. Thus, adults’ fears of the young linger unresolved.

Perhaps many teenagers’ recent enthusiasm for tattooing and body piercing, along with the recurrent attraction for eccentric haircuts and dress, is a reaction to our lack of meaningful ritual. Many observers of primitive societies have noted that young people look forward to rites that involve circumcision, scarification, piercing, and other painful rites because they offer visible acknowledgment of their maturity. Few contemporary parents accept and encourage these markers, as parents in tribal societies do, and most view them as signs of immaturity rather than adulthood. But they are a powerful way for young people to assert control over their own bodies and demand recognition that they are, at least, sexually mature.

Fear and hostility toward the young isn’t found in every society, but it’s common and some of the reasons for it are easy to understand. The simple fact is that when the young are ready to be grown up, their
Different cultures make different rules for their youth groups. One East African tribe countenanced promiscuity for their young, and members of the group often resisted moving up to maturity and monogamy. A neighboring tribe tried to ban all sex before thirty, though it’s difficult to imagine it was successful. What these (almost invariably male) youth groups had in common was that they lived in a world virtually all their own, tantalizingly on the verge of adulthood for years.

It’s striking that when van Gennep wrote his book *Rites of Passage* in 1908, he felt it necessary to observe that those he called the semicivilized make a group distinction “one for which our society has no real counterpart—a division into generation or age groups.”

Western history offers only a few examples of what might have been thought of as distinct youth groups. The ancient Athenian equivalent of the teenager was the *ephebe*, an upper-class young man who had finished two or more years of primary schooling and several years of secondary schooling and was supposed to be receiving military training. The young men, segregated from those of other ages, were notorious for their drunkenness, destructive pranks, and violence. The Athenians had also passed laws to forbid young people from beating their parents, an indication of a possibly justified fear of the young. We know from Greek art that youth was a quality that Greek culture celebrated. It’s tempting to see them as premature Californians—in love with skin and muscle, fearful of the action these hard-bodied young men might take.

Yet, much of this seeming youth culture was passed down from the elders to the young. The symposium, or drinking party, generally consisted of men of very different ages where young men would learn to talk about adult topics, drink, and be initiated into sex with prostitutes and with the older men present. In this context, the *ephebe* seems to have been like the initiate of an “animal house” fraternity, acting a youthful hedonism and destructiveness that his elders expected and encouraged.

In ancient Sparta, it was also assumed that young people would be violent and destructive, but there it was channeled, somewhat in the manner of Mao’s Red Guards, to maintain autocratic control. At age twelve or so, upper-class boys would be put under the tutelage of young men a few years older, who would, among other things, teach them how to steal to support themselves. Those who were caught were beaten severely; the lesson was not to get caught. At age seventeen, many youths became members of the *knupieia*, whose purpose was to physically and
psychologically intimidate the slave population. Unlike young Athenians, whose years at the threshold involved the paradoxical qualities of invisibility and menace found in many tribal societies, as well as our own, the young Spartans at the threshold had a purpose. They were guarding the door.

In medieval Europe, there were charivaris: rowdy, often violent groups of young men who attacked what they saw as marital misconduct—such as older men marrying younger women and widows marrying too soon. They were fighting in the interest of their generation; it’s difficult for poorer young men to compete for younger women with their propertyied elders. If they could shame such rivals into fearing that they would be viewed as dirty old men, the younger men would have a chance.

Still, these are isolated examples. Throughout European history, and its extension into the Americas, family ties have always been more important than generational ones.

Today, however, it’s impossible to hear about the age group practices of African and Australian tribal groups without thinking of our own. Like the African groups mentioned above, we name our generations. We are boomers, or Generation X, and we will be so until we die. We make assumptions about people’s behavior and values depending upon when they come of age. Members of distinct age groups listen to particular styles of popular music, and even particular songs, from puberty to the grave.

To some degree, Americans begin to be segregated with their agemates the moment they enter nursery school, but the separation becomes more pronounced as young people enter their teens. That is the point when parents feel that they have lost power to their children’s peers. Young people are less likely to follow parents’ agendas. Often, they don’t come home for dinner, much less deign to make an appearance at family occasions. Perhaps they work at a store or restaurant where all the other employees and many of the customers are their own age. They buy products, go to movies, and listen to music, all directed at them and their friends. We encourage the creation of a youth culture, profit from it, buy stock in it. Then we’re threatened by it.

By 1955, when S. N. Eisenstadt wrote *From Generation to Generation*, the seminal book on the sociology of age group relations, it was clear that youth groups were playing an important role in advanced Western cultures. Eisenstadt argued that age groups are not universal, but that they have been found in many different times and places where either of two conditions exist. The first of these is that the power of the family must be diminished. If young people cannot expect their family connections or birthright to secure them a position in the society, they must interact with those who will be coming into their full powers at the same time. Eisenstadt argued that nearly all modern societies minimize the degree to which young people can depend on their families to win position, though none more so than the United States.

Our culture created the teenager largely because we don’t know what the future will be like. The American teenager as we know it today is the product of adult uncertainty about what the world would become. As we’ll see, the decision to forgo the benefits of young people’s labor in favor of a prolonged period of education and training grew from parents’ fears that change was rendering their own skills and knowledge obsolete. A son who followed in his father’s footsteps was on the road to nowhere.

Eisenstadt’s second condition for the formation of youth groups is the unwillingness or inability of the older generation to pass on wealth and power to the young. If, for example, land is in limited supply, young people have to wait until they come into their inheritance, which could be at a relatively advanced age, before they can marry and lead truly mature lives. This is not an uncommon problem in agricultural societies. Alternatively, the elderly may truly be greedy and unwilling to come to terms with the needs of the young.

These two prerequisites—lack of family power and inability to share the wealth—are not mutually exclusive. The first is the main force that drives our culture’s practice of prolonging adolescence and creating a nation of the young, but hints of a generational struggle for wealth are never wholly absent. The movement to restrict child labor, for example, was driven in part by a desire to shrink the labor force and raise wages. More recently, advocates of a subminimum wage for teenagers have argued that young people shouldn’t receive wages high enough to tempt them to leave school. Grown-ups tell the young that they need more and more time and training to prepare for their maturity; the young aren’t sure they believe it.

It’s important to note that the psychological meaning of adolescence described in the last chapter is significantly different from the anthropo-
logical or sociological definition we've been considering in this one. The first is understood as an unchanging and unavoidable part of human development. The second describes the practice of many, though not all, societies, to set aside a period between physical and social maturity to prepare young people for full adulthood. Even if adolescence is a social invention, it feels very real to one who is going through it. But unlike something that is inherent in the species, such a cultural phenomenon can change rapidly, especially when it isn't doing its job.

This distinction between the psychological and social definitions of adolescence is the core of one of the most influential studies of youth ever made: Margaret Mead's *Coming of Age in Samoa*.

In 1926 the twenty-four-year-old anthropologist journeyed to the South Pacific to prove a point about American society. Her message was that G. S. Hall's vision of stormy, troubled, painful adolescence, which was virtually unquestioned at the time and remains influential today, is neither universal nor necessary. Mead needed only one strong counterexample to make her point. If there is even one society free of what were, and often are, considered the inescapable storms of adolescence, she could prove that the stress is not inherent in human development.

In Samoa, she found a society that believed controlling the sexuality of the young not to be important. Elders expected the young to be sexually active, she observed, and they didn’t connect such sexual experimentation with marriage. That, at least, was the headline during the 1920s, a decade when American sexual mores were in transition and young women were the driving force for changing them. Innocent, sexy, and above all, naked Polynesians were already creatures of the popular imagination, and Mead offered what seemed to be a scientifically rigorous vision of paradise.

Mead's Samoa was a place where adolescence meant little because not very much was at stake. Children who became dissatisfied for any reason could move out of their household and into that of a relative, even a fairly distant one. Tending babies was done not by mothers but by young girls, who treated their charges carelessly. There were relatively few skills required of either sex before their ascendance to adult status. And although missionaries were present, and a boarding school as well, Mead depicted them not as forces of modernization, but rather as additional options for youth in a society where most crises could be sidestepped.

The static culture Mead found in Samoa couldn’t be less like America’s dynamic, fast-changing society. Mead was careful to tell her American readers that, trouble-free adolescence aside, they probably would not be comfortable in a society with so little conflict and drama. American culture, and Western culture in general, encourages individuals to be heroes of their own lives. The Samoans did not view life in terms of challenge and triumph. There was little reason to forge a strong individual identity or to struggle with one's parents. People identified with groups of people with whom they had multiple, but weak, links. The reason that adolescence was relatively trouble-free, then, was that, unlike American adolescence, it didn’t really need to accomplish very much. Mead recognized that Americans needed an adolescent period to prepare their young people for life in a complex society; she simply didn’t think that telling young people that they were troubled and incompetent was either helpful or true.

Since the 1980s, Mead’s methods and findings in Samoa have come under attack. Mead’s critics argue that the islands were nowhere near as free of conflict and strong feelings during the 1920s as her book suggests. There is little doubt that Mead had an agenda; she made little effort to hide it.

For me, the most telling and interesting criticism of Mead's work in Samoa is that she assumed that behavior that was widely tolerated was approved. In other words, she identified what was really happening—an enormous amount of guilt-free premarital sex enjoyed equally by males and females—as the expression of Samoan society’s values. Mead pointed out that the young people made a pretense of hiding their sexual activities, but she did not emphasize that, if asked, most Samoans would voice disapproval.

It would be easy for an observer to make a similar mistake about 1990s North America. Statistical studies indicate that a very large percentage of teens are sexually active. This high incidence would seem to suggest that teenage sexuality is generally tolerated, though, if asked for an opinion of the phenomenon, an overwhelming majority of adults would voice their disapproval of it.

Still, the importance of Margaret Mead’s work doesn’t lie in the details of her ethnographic observations. Rather, it springs from her ability to imagine how cultures respond to changing circumstances and to persuade people to think about how they might change. She showed culture to be profound, persistent, and real, at the same time that she revealed it to be largely an act of human imagination. A shift in the
patterns of people's expectations can bring changes more profound than can be achieved by any purely political revolution.

One needn't go all the way to Samoa to realize that cultures change and that adolescence and teenagers aren't inevitable, and may not even be necessary. We can look instead at our own past, in which young people have played a stunning variety of roles—some of which anticipated the contemporary teenage experience, many of which did not.

FOUR
Family Values

It was for your sakes especially, that your Fathers ventured their lives upon the rude waves of the vast Ocean.

—INCREASE MATHER (1673)

More than half a century after the founding of Massachusetts, Mather, the famous Puritan preacher, addressed a congregation of second- and third-generation settlers about their predecessors' intentions. His message was one repeated by generation after generation of colonists, immigrants, pioneers, and even suburbanites: We did it for the kids.

Some parents sacrificed to assure their children's safety, others to create a family fortune. Some were being hypocritical and did not worry about future generations at all, though they found it useful to pretend they did.

Nevertheless, this familiar story of what parents did for their children leaves out something very important: what young people did for their families, themselves, and their country. American history is a multigenerational story, in which young people have played an essential part. The precise nature of their contribution to the culture has changed many times over the centuries. Still, they have always played a role, and it has always been important.

The labor of teenagers—and of preteenagers as well—has played a very large role in the development of North America. Much of the time,