

Introduction

In the Name of God The Compassionate, the Merciful

I counsel you to be good to youth, for they have the softest hearts.

This is a beautiful, prophetic piece of advice. But how many parents and nurturers have heard it? Had they acted upon it, they would have been successful in their interaction with this age group, which represents unquestionably the most fertile stage of life!

Here is how psychologists, educators, and Sociologists have presented their findings on youth:

Psychologists view the stage of youth as one of long personal crisis and personal struggle with various influences and reactions. They regard youths as adolescents; a stage which brings worry, confusion, depression, agitation, and every other difficult term found in psychology dictionaries.

Educators believe that the crisis (assuming that we first subscribe to the belief that there is a crisis) is one of structure and development, and that responsibility rests on the shoulders of the educational institutions—whose basic function is to lay the foundations of this structure and to develop the methods and forms of further learning.

Sociologists see youth as a crisis in conformity, change, and behaviour...

Is Youth Really a Crisis?

We do not believe that it is.

If we agree that there is a problem or crisis, then it is not in the youth themselves, for they (the softest of heart) are very sensitive, good-hearted, well-intentioned. They are ready to understand and to compromise with the world around them. Youths are not a problem. Rather, the problem is to know how to get close to and to work with them.

The youth—boy or girl—is neither intrinsically disobedient, perturbed by nature, or harsh. Rather, it is the environment and the milieu, be it in the house, school, street, or institution. One may not properly interact with the youth's sharp sensibilities and instead treat him with hardness leading to harshness.

One may err in dealing with someone who has just emerged from childhood into relative maturity. The youth may be looked upon as that same little child who remains a child. The words of the poet best speaks of this false assumption for many who work in that field:

Leila remains a child in my eye,

Since yesterday, she has not grown but a finger's width...

If this is the analogy, then you should not expect from those who work with the youth anything but to put more pressure and to impose more prohibitions unsheathing the sword of prohibition on things in which God never gave them authority, that people may look at them as an example.

We call on you, parents, teachers, nurturers, those who would right the situation, to read the columns from newspapers and magazines which say "I want a solution," "Problems and Solutions," or "Guide me to the path." You will see for yourselves that the larger problem lies in misunderstanding and bad interaction.

In conditions such as these, what happens?

The youth—boy and girl—falls back on the people closest to him, his peers. And here he undergoes insufficient or deficient experience, drawing imaginary solutions from films or serials; or else solutions from newspapers dealing with youths from a perspective which may, at the very least, be said to be un-Islamic.

The youth may become withdrawn, confining himself behind the closed the doors of his room, because the stifling atmosphere has caused him to be misunderstood and mistreated. Inside his closed room, he indulges in every mental and sexual fantasy—sometimes daydreaming of time, when there will be better understanding and relations. Other times, his mood changes to one of resentment and anger, displaying withdrawal, hostility, or disgust by excessive reactions to things.

Why Do We Force Them Into a Negative Position?

Would it not be better for us to open our hearts to them, be warmer to them, to speak gently and be more openminded—to speak to them in a language which basically says:

We love you very much and we care about you, we do not want you to fall into great error or be taken unawares by error. Live your life in the spirit of your times. But he who wants to take a path, the contours of which he does not know, should take the time to ask: 'Where is the road?' If not, he will lose his way and stray far away from the road...

We do not wish to dictate or impose on you ...reflect on our advice, our sincerest guidance ...we are closer to you than anything else around you ...your happiness is our happiness ...and what makes you

unhappy makes us unhappy ...let us work together as friends.

This is the point through which mutual understanding is reached, the point where we can say "let us work together as friends." It is the coveted opportunity, and the main thing that guides us to the solution of the problem in a way that is human, reflecting wisdom and good exhortation instead of cutting off dialogue in a dictatorial manner.

Understanding and mutual comprehension are what we must seek to deal with youth; and we must ask ourselves if at homes we enjoy this state of affairs in terms of sincere and loving interaction. If we do, we shall live then happily, as will our children.

In our schools, assemblies, and institutions the prevailing methodology is one of positive attitude towards students according to the following equations:

youth=hope

youth=ambition

youth=confidence

youth=dynamism

youth=imam

If this is valid, then we must offer valuable and active trust.

We do not agree with the equations:

youth=irresponsibility

youth=distraction

youth=loss

youth=effeminacy

youth=risks everything offered (even if long outdated)

We are of the view that

youth=message

youth=receptivity to the time in analysis and perception

And that:

youth=construction, development

youth=hope, ambition

youth=living, dynamic reality

which can pull out the roots of blind imitation, corruption, and licentiousness to create a better situation than the one in which a youth may find himself inheriting. He can realize his true position in terms of

self-esteem, which is unimaginable without a better knowledge of our own Islam. Islam will gain for us what is good in this life and the hereafter. It is an Islam which solves our particular problems and difficulties.

From the Islamic perspective, we understand that the stage of youth, which represents the intermediate stage of life, rests on contemplation, realization, and guidance. If not, how can the sacred lawgiver make youth legally responsible according to the *Shari 'ah*.

What would this mean in terms of intelligence, observance, proof, and punishment, if the youth were not capable of assuming responsibility? But what type of responsibility? That of viceregency and of *Shari 'ah* liabilities which put the youth in the ranks of the rest of those charged with responsibility on a completely equal footing.

They will, on Judgment Day, all stand together to be judged, not on the criterion that this one is an old man and that one is a youth, but rather on the basis that they are equally responsible.

But what is noticeable with respect to rearing in our Islamic milieu is that sometimes we abandon the child for the first seven years, then we abandon him for another seven; and we add to this a third seven, without rearing him according to the stages taught by the *Sunna* namely, that we discipline him in the second seven-year period, that we be his companion in the third period.

We forget—and sometimes cause ourselves to forget—that the stage preceding puberty, or impinging on it, is the first stage. Training him for entry into the world of youth, an entry that is good and without any tumult or difficulty. There is a difference between entering this world with blind eyes, finding everything around him strange and difficult, and entering with the counsel of his two parents.

In the second, he has already dealt with the world in some manner, and has been exposed to some of its general characteristics. This is the difference between one who is acclimatized and one who is awed by first impressions. It is the closest thing to the beginning stage, to kindergarten, which comes before school.

Indeed the Islamic *Shari 'ah* accepts the worship of the child who is able to distinguish and rewards him for this worship; not his responsibility and continued compliance, but because it was appreciated and because it is voluntary. This prepares him to accept heavy responsibility, as the time has not yet come for him to be so taxed.

From a second perspective, we must admit candidly that the problem of raising the young lady falls in one area and that of raising the young man falls in another. I describe this as a "problem" because this is exactly the situation of many religious families and households. A disparaging attitude is adopted towards the gentle, kind creation of God—the young lady—and this attitude is what dictates how she is treated.

Meanwhile, the sons are preferred and made to stand out from the girls, treated differently even in error and failure. This attitude still exists as a fact of life in many households where modern material facilities have entered, but where the criteria for proper value determination and just treatment between sons and daughters have not.

Because of all this, and other factors to boot, we have gone to His Eminence Ayatullah al-Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Fadlullah, requesting a comprehensive treatise on the core issues and problems of youth. This was not done with the view that no great author in Islam has ever dealt with this dynamic issue, but rather in the belief that none—as far as our readings show—has with quite the same candor and forcefulness of his eminence, Ayatollah Fadlullah. We know that candor has taken its toll and forcefulness its consequences. But is the truth to remain inside its shell, afraid to stretch its head out in the light? And until when?

We feel that hiding reality, fabricating or toying with it, adding or subtracting from it is all sin. If some are afraid to tell it like it is, in a free atmosphere, then they deprive the younger generation of the opportunity to stand firm, on a solid footing or ideal, and to move towards the vast horizons where the tolerance and munificence of Islam have never been closed.

The (negative) consequences, rather, have been felt by those who have, under different pretexts, blocked the path to these horizons. We see today scholars who realize the danger and are working very hard to bring their knowledge to the people. .

With the grace of God, we stand before the truth which, while long absent, offers the means for correcting the situation. Its reality carries the strength of resolution, freedom, and full objectivity.

By the grace of God, we have opened the file most completely—the youth dossier and the counsel of the Prophet Muhammad. We have applied the wise guidance on youth in every situation, on parenthood, on being dutiful children and the message, etc. The Noble Qur'an has dealt with these and stated them most beautifully for there is nothing purer or better—for the youths for all time and all generations

By the grace of God, too, we have touched on adolescence in its most minute details, issues, and particulars, to the point where some matters were broached with certain caution, to be whispered in private or in closed circles.

Since the responsibility for molding youth properly is an undertaking that requires effort and repeated experiment, we have discussed the main problems relating to youth instruction, beginning with the Islamic teacher and nurturer, by following the system of imitation, blessing and sin, cultural showing off, and finally on sex education and counseling.

We have not forgotten the practical aspect of youthful life, and we have focused in our long journey with his eminence, the scholar Fadlullah on various subjects relating to politics, associations, and students.

We have judged the general parameters of the discussion and its broad outlines useful, and that they required the completeness of *fiqh*, guided by the *Shari 'ah*, especially with respect to what concerns youths. Although we look for adequate answers to many contentious issues, we have never reached a final solution.

We have asked Ayatullah Fadlullah about singing and music, new fashions, musical instruments, predicting the future through horoscopes and teacup readings, and other matters from all the issues that challenge youth. And throughout, in discussions that stretched for two years, in matters that sometimes caused us to fumble, we asked: How does a youth live? How does he deal with his youth?

How will he rear his own sons and daughters in their youth? We do not claim to have exhausted every point of discussion on matters that concern our youth, but we feel that what we have done is a great step, a great achievement which will have tremendous and far reaching benefits. No matter how much we try to overcome our shortcomings or complete things, there will always be some fault that affects our undertaking.

Some things have been inculcated into us from the beginning of our journey. And so, at the end of every chapter, we present our readers with a summary of the most important topics discussed there. We have also put in a final chapter on some general fatwas on youth—if we may call them so which we have obtained from his eminence, Ayatullah Fadlullah.

We welcome from our youths—both young ladies and young men—any criticism or comments regarding this work.

We trust that God will accept this humble work, and that it will benefit us on a day when neither property nor progeny will avail anyone but those who come to God with pure hearts.

Ahmad Ahmad & Adil al-Qadi

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