

In Pursuit of Eternal Youth

by Sylvie Lapointe – December 6, 2009

In 1960's-1970's there was a radical change in social order. The adults lost their power to make the rules, young people took over that privilege. So says [Diane Pacom](#), a well-known sociology professor at the University of Ottawa and a frequent guest on Radio Canada, and the conference circuits. On Friday morning I attended her presentation to a group of University of Ottawa retirees entitled "Quand le boom fait face à son écho" (When the boom faces its echo).

Mme Pacom started by defining what it means to be considered "young". Being young means that you are under tutelage, someone else decides for you. Being young also means that you are not responsible or accountable for your actions.

Before the 1960's there was no "youth" per say from a societal point of view. You were either a child or an adult. Puberty marked the beginning of adulthood. You learned your trade on the farm or in the print shop and once you mastered it, you went to work. My dad who was a child of the Depression years worked to support his family at the age of 11. His mother, Fleurette, married my grandfather at the age of 17 and went on to raise eight kids. It is unthinkable that kids that age would have those kinds of responsibilities in this day and age isn't it?



But in the 1960's all that changed. Society started on its pursuit for eternal youthfulness. As Diane Pacom said, in the 1950's young girls aspired to be just like their mothers - playing at being a mom and learning to cook and clean just like her so they could be somebody's wife some day. Nowadays, mothers aspire to be like their daughters, chatting with them about their dating experiences (since over half of them are divorced), dressing in tight jeans and revealing tops, and getting Botox injections to erase the passage of time on their face.

When Mme Pacom started studying the phenomenon of youth in the 1980's, youth was defined as a period of 10 years between 14 years to 24 years. Today, sociologists consider that youth is a period spanning 30 years (!) between 14 years and 34 years.

Traditionally there were five markers that defined the passage from youth to adulthood:

1. End of Studies:

The end of studies marked a time when you had acquired the knowledge and know-how you needed to go forth in the world and succeed.

In the early 1950's, you finished your secondary at age 17 or 18 and started to work right away. Rare were those who went on to university. Girls aspired to a job as a secretary, a hairdresser or maybe a teacher. When they got married, they left their "careers" to take care of the children. Men had a much wider world of possibilities when it came to careers.

Today, most kids go to college or university after their secondary school. Many move on to doing Masters and Phd's. The "end" of studies comes much later in life.

Thanks to marketing companies and the consumer society it created, we are in a perpetual state of not "knowing".

We do not know how to eat: Depending on the diet of the day we are told to eliminate fats, eliminate carbohydrates, increase the proteins, add olive oil and flax seeds. Toss the vitamins E you bought a few years ago, now you need to beef up your consumption of vitamin D. Do you think our grandmothers worried about these kind of things?

We do not know how to breathe: We need to take yoga classes to reacquaint ourselves with our breath.

We do not know how to walk: The Running Room is making a fortune with their "Learn to Walk" clubs

We do not know how to live. We need life coaches to hold us by the hand to help us figure out our lives.

Today, we are never finished learning. We feel incompetent and unsure. We are told that we need expert advice on everything and anything.

2. When you get married.

The Baby Boomers rejected the tradition of marriage. Sexual experimentation starts younger and younger (I read a stat recently that said that in Quebec for example, the average age of the first sexual encounter is 14 years old). *Living with* rather than being *married to* seems to be the preferred trend. And for those of us who do get married, half the marriages end in the divorce.

3. When you choose a profession.

In my dad's era, you chose a career and it was for life. My dad was a biologist for 35 years working for the same organization that whole time. (In his early fifties, he went

back to school to get a Masters in Human Sciences but that is another story)

In my case, (I'm a 1960's child) I rarely stayed in a job more than a few years. Four years is the longest I stayed in one job in the same organization. On average, I change jobs every couple of years.

According to Mme Pacom, today's youth see life as non-linear and fragmented. They live for the present moment, moving from one thing to another following what is their current passion. There is no such thing as choosing a career. They choose to explore an interest and follow it until something else comes along.

4. When we leave our parent's home.

We call today's parents, the "boomerang" parents. They send out their kids into the big wide world but they come back, come back, and come back again. There are many 35 year olds living in their parents basements these days, sometimes with their whole family in tow!

5. When we start a family.

The current trend is that women have babies later in life, once their studies are finished and they are established in their careers. On average women have babies in their late twenties and early thirties and there are more and more women having their first baby in their forties.

Diane Pacom argues that all these markers of the passage of youth to adulthood have disappeared in our society. Adults have lost their legitimacy and their authority. Youth, or youthfulness rules today.

"What is the solution? What can we do?" asked a teary-eyed participant at the end of Pacom's presentation. "I think we need to bring back humanity in our superficial consumer society. We need to find our self-respect again. Once, as adults, we become self-assured, we need to find it within ourselves to also respect our youth." Youth want to relate to us as equals. They act as if they could not care less about what we think but truly, they need our guidance. We just need to find the door that will let us in.

Diane Pacom received the 3M Teaching Fellowship award as an outstanding educator in 2004. Together with nine other recipients, she spent three days reflecting on what were the key ingredients to being an outstanding educator. It came down to just one thing: "Love them. Love them in the holistic sense of the word. When you are spending time with youth, you need to be totally there with them, your body, your mind and your spirit. Don't pretend that you are spending quality with your youth by going through the motions and still being preoccupied in your head with your kitchen list of things to do. Just BE there."

What do you think about all this? How does this apply to the workplace as well?