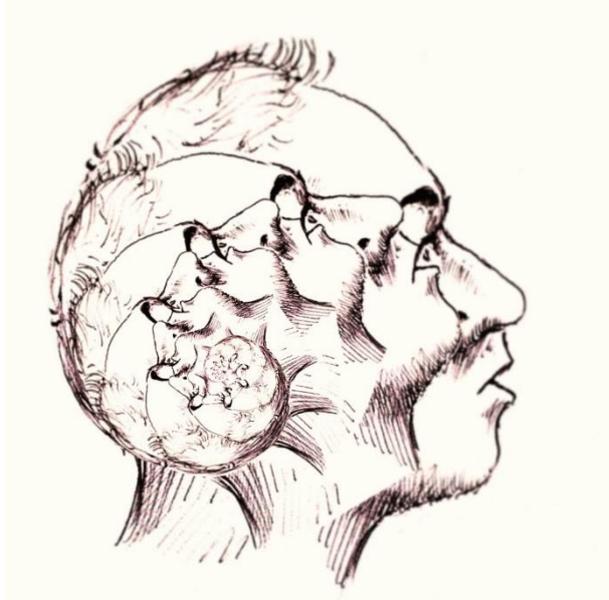


TIME FOR 'GROWN UP ADULTS' (*Part 1*) [5 mins]



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We think in categories. One of the commonest categories we work with every day, generally without attending much to its basis, is that of 'adult'.

Yet the crisis wrought by the coronavirus pandemic has exposed the limitations of 'adult' as a category of thought for thinking about peoples' behaviour and *how* they think.

During the first Covid Lockdown we were like children with the excitement of something new – dreams of baking sourdough bread

and the search for yeast. Then we were 'let out to play' again, by an outgoing government rushing before the handing over office, and many 'adults' went on a bash. Some, although knowingly infected, went around spreading the disease.

We have to lock down again as a result.

Now it is time to be 'grown up adults'.

We have to start constructing that 'new normal' people were talking about the first time around, but which we forgot to do, before many reverted to the 'old normal'. And we will not create a 'new normal' unless we change *how we think* because *what we think* flows from the *how we think*.

How We Think is the crisis of our times. It underpins the three great crises facing us now: the long-rolling but now arrived climate crisis, the crisis enveloping democracies over the last decade, and, most recently, the immediate public health crisis. The common factor underpinning these crises and making sense of them is the way we think.

We now have to deal with a permanently more complex world and live at greater uncertainty. We need to listen to the 'grown up adults' this time around, despite all the airtime being currently given to the 'immature adults' on talk radio programmes, *and* to think for ourselves. That requires us to be 'grown up adults'.

The Covid Crisis has exposed, in a way that the climate and democracy crises did not, that there are many highly educated, trained, and experienced people heading governments, organisations, and companies who are mentally aligned with a simpler world and do not grasp the actuality of the one in which they live. They are not yet 'grown-up adults'.

'Growing up' in how we think is a distinct matter from growing to a certain biological age which is arbitrarily deemed by society to be 'adult'. Age is the way 'adulthood' is defined and generally taken, without any thought, in our daily lives. Being a 'grown-up' adult, as distinct from just growing to a certain age deemed arbitrarily to be an adult, as the way 'adulthood' is defined and taken generally, is explained by Susan Neiman, following Immanuel Kant on 'enlightenment', in *Why Grow Up? Subversive Thoughts for an Infantile Age* (Chapter 4, Penguin Books, London, 2016).

Let us think in an example.

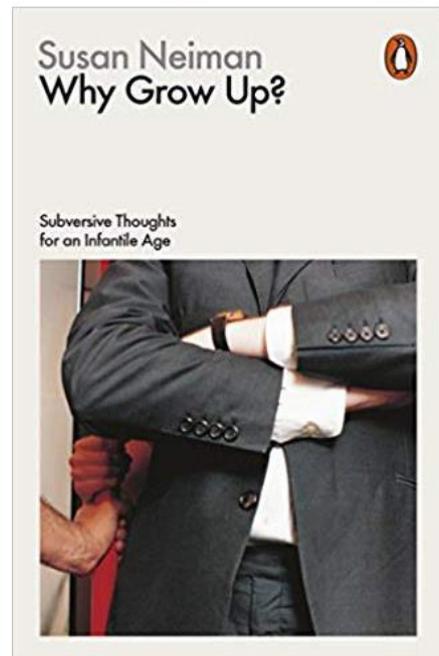
An 'Immature Adult'

Donald Trump, although an 'adult' in the conventional sense of biological age, appears as chief executive officer of the U.S. Government not to be a 'grown-up adult'.

For example, Donald W. Drezner, a professor of international politics at Tufts University's Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy in Boston and a *Washington Post* contributor, used the American Academy of Pediatrics descriptions of small child behaviour to argue that Trump acts like a *toddler*.

Through this prism, Drezner made a collection over three years of more than one thousand Tweets documenting examples of Trump's own aides and allies describing him exhibiting infantile behaviour or behaving like a toddler (acknowledging of course that there's nothing untoward about such

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behaviour in a young child; indeed, such behaviour is normal in a child, hence its labelling).

Drezner examined these descriptions of Trump being like a small, badly-behaved pre-schooler in his book, *The Toddler in Chief: What Donald Trump Teaches Us About the Modern Presidency* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2020).

Chapters on temper tantrums, short attention spans, poor impulse control, oppositional behaviour, knowledge deficits, and too much screen time reflected the typical 'small child dimensions' of Trump's behaviours.

While good parents may be able to re-direct wayward behaviour by a small child without too much destruction, it is an entirely different matter where the toddler-like adult is the President of the United States, especially in a situation where it also appears that there are not many 'adults in the room'. Hence the continuation of such behaviours and, indeed, even the worsening of it under pressure, just as we may observe in a small child and as we observe in Trump's behaviour.

Quite Common

Many of us will have experienced adults, including managers and CEOs of organisations, exhibiting similar characteristics in their behaviour and, sometimes it seems, for no other reason than they can do so.

As Hannah Arendt put it in her *Life of Mind* (1974) the inability to think and the absence of thought "can be found in highly intelligent people":

"Thinking in its non-cognitive, non-specialised sense as a natural need of human life, ... is not a prerogative of the few but an ever-present faculty [power/ability] in everybody; by the same token, inability to think is not a failing of the many who lack brain power but an ever-present possibility for everyone – scientists, scholars, and other specialists in the mental enterprises not excluded."

We need to be clear, therefore, that the ability to think is about much more than schooling, education, or any types of qualifications. And we must also recognise that, although most of those heading governments, organisations, and companies may be seen as highly educated and have all the credentials to impress people, they are nevertheless limited by their capability not being aligned with the world in which we live today.

Research by the developmental psychologist Robert Kegan, of the Graduate School of Education at Harvard University, Boston has shown that the great majority of people in a population are, in his memorable phrase, 'in over their heads' when dealing with the demands of modern life.

We need minds capable of dealing with complexity and operating at uncertainty in a complex and uncertain world. Of course, many other skills are also necessary, but such minds are necessary as the starting point.

And so, finally, to ourselves

If 'Grown-up adulthood' is not a stage of development to be presumed as having been reached in all adults simply by virtue of biological age, the questions arising include:

Has 'Adult' as a category of thought been exposed as inadequate for the challenges of today?

Is this concept in need of refinement for thinking with about what is going on in the current crises?

How useful is it for understanding many aspects of *how people think* and their ensuing behaviour to consider all people equally 'adult' based on passing a certain age milestone?

How, not what, do you think about the questions arising here?

Are you willing and curious to work on *how you think* and how to discover *how you think* currently and what you can do with this awareness?

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