CAN WE DISCUSS THIS LIKE ADULTS?

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(1) For the sixth-grade girls, the epitome of adulthood occurred at the annual Spaghetti Supper. It was on this occasion, officially agreed upon, that we wore high heels for the first time in public. Wobbling about with nylons hanging around our ankles, we felt sure that we had finally arrived.

(2) There are many "peaks" in life when the height of adulthood seems to arrive, at least until the next "peak" appears around the bend: at sixteen we have the opportunity to get a driver's license, at seventeen we're allowed to view "R-rated" movies, at eighteen we become legal adults and are eligible to vote, and at twenty-one we're permitted to drink alcohol. At this point, it seems, we are mature; on our twenty-first birthday, full adulthood hits us like a brick on the head.

(3) On the other hand, accepted signs of adulthood occur at different life stages for different people. Do you remember your first cup of coffee? Which was the first Christmas that clothes under the tree weren't a disappointment? When did you quit having to be babysat? Contrary to popular belief, these "hallmarks of adulthood" are not, taken in themselves, accurate definitions of "adult." How then can we define adulthood?

(4) I believe that adulthood is, first of all, an attitude. When a person uses the privileges and rights given her in a responsible manner because of her individual conscience, that person has achieved adulthood. In our society, anyone over the age of eighteen is technically considered an adult, and most people enjoy this title without living up to its obligations. But if the conditions of adulthood were written out, the necessary fine print would read, "The choice to use adult privileges in a responsible fashion because of a developed conscience."

(5) This slow transition from a childhood conscience to an adult one occurs in six stages of social development which happen at indefinite time intervals depending on the individual's rate of growth. At first, the choice to act responsibly stems from the fear of punishment: we want to avoid having the newfound privileges taken away. In the second stage, in order to obtain more advanced privileges, we conform to expected behavior patterns. This is the reward stage. The third stage is the desire for approval and the need for social acceptance; because we want to please others, we act responsibly. Maintaining authority is the fourth stage;
that is, we obey laws and norms merely because they exist. The fifth stage involves an agreement or contract with society, the realization that responsible action is necessary for the good of all. Adulthood is not fully reached until the sixth and final stage of social development—responsible action which stems from the decision of an individual conscience.

(6) Many people equate "adult" with a boring, stuffy character whose life lacks excitement and spontaneity. I strongly disagree. Adults have opportunities not available to children or teenagers. If they take advantage of these privileges in a personally responsible manner, they can live interesting and fulfilling lives.

(7) It is a shame that so many people misunderstand the true characteristics of adulthood. Not only are they living a lie, but their actions and attitudes are detrimental to themselves and society as a whole.