

High School & Beyond Personal Advice

by
James B. Stenson

Personal development

- All development, from childhood to maturity, involves going from *self* to *others*—from concern with one's own self to that for the rights and sensibilities of others, including (above all) God. A child is self-centered; a mature adult is other-centered. Mature adolescents are really young adults, no longer children—and so they think of others.

- To develop as a mature young adult means to grow in the character strengths (virtues) of faith, hope, charity, sound judgment (including conscience), responsibility, personal toughness & perseverance, and self-mastery. If you've been well brought up since childhood, then your parents have already taught you the basics of these strengths. As you enter young adulthood, your challenge is to grow in these strengths yourself, deliberately and by your own efforts. This you do by repeated practice, seeking and following sound advice, and relying on God's help. The ideal is that, by the time you're in your later teens, you have become a competent, responsible, considerate and generous man who is committed to live by Christian principles—so you can pass these strengths and values on to your own children.

- Honor your parents. This you do by internalizing their values, living by them all your life, and passing them on to your children whole and intact. Learn from your parents. Take their experienced advice seriously; only a fool fails to learn from the experience of others. Sometimes it requires more wisdom to take good advice than to give it.

- Prepare to become a great husband and father. If God has called you to marriage (and He probably has), your family responsibilities will be your greatest challenge—and meeting them will be your greatest source of happiness, here on earth and for all eternity.

- Pleasure is not happiness, nor is amusement nor fame nor money. Happiness in life comes from several sources: (a) a clear conscience; (b) the faithful fulfillment of your vocation (both family and profession); (c) the full use of your powers along lines of excellence; (d) being of service to others; (e) enjoying the devoted esteem of everyone who knows you; (f) seeing your children grow to become great men and women.

- Being respected is more important than being "popular." People's respect derives from their perception of strengths in you—the strengths of faith, hope, charity, sound judgment, responsibility, toughness, and self-control. Someone with these strengths is happily self-confident, and therefore he inspires the confidence of others. He's a leader, at home and on the job and in society.

- People must respect your *integrity*. This means that they see in you a unity of intentions, word, and action—that you say what you mean, you mean what you say, and you keep your word. Don't make promises lightly; but if you make them, you must keep your word. If your honor doesn't mean much to you, then it will mean little or nothing to others.

- Don't be afraid to apologize. This means you are strong enough to put justice ahead of your ego. And don't be afraid to admit mistakes; this means you place

truth ahead of your pride. Mistakes can be valuable if we learn from them. Don't look back on the past except to learn from it.

- Don't bear grudges. Forget about past grievances and put them behind you. You have been forgiven much, by God and by those closest to you. Aside from being a moral fault, grudge-bearing is a waste of time and mental energy. Get on with your life.
- "Maturity" is really another word for *responsibility*. Mature adults, no matter what their age, are responsible. They know what responsibility really means—*If I don't do my duty, someone else gets hurt; my neglect or mistake leads to someone else's suffering*. People do not grow up when they can take care of themselves; they really grow up when they can *take care of others*—and want to.
- One of the great signs of maturity is a habit of genuine consideration for the dignity and rights of others. This means, among other things, having a habit of using (and meaning) the four great "pillars" of civilized life: *please, thank you, I'm sorry, and I give my word*.
- Always bear in mind, when tempted to think that perhaps your parents don't "trust" you, that they trust your *integrity* but not always your *judgment*. Sound judgment grows with experience, and you're still acquiring it. When your parents see you exercising relatively mature judgment (such as by submitting to their judgment about your welfare), then they will come to trust you entirely. So, paradoxically, the more you push to assert your will contrary to their judgment, the less inclined they will be to let you have your way. But the more you give in and trust their judgment, the sooner they will see that you really are grown up, and they'll give you the freedom you long for.
- What is called "obedience" in childhood and youth, is called "collaboration" and "cooperation" among adults. We adults all answer to somebody all our lives—to God, to family responsibilities, to employers and customers and clients, and to the law. The "obedience" you live in family life now is really preparation to living collaborative teamwork all the rest of your life. Leadership, too—for no one can effectively lead unless he has first learned to intelligently obey. When you see obedience/collaboration this way, as an adult sees it, you'll be preparing yourself to exercise effective leadership in your future family and professional life.

School life—development

- High school is (or should be) a preparation for life, not one last fling at it. The high-school years are not the "best time of your life"; in some ways, they're the most confusing and troublesome. In other words, you should look forward to better times ahead of you in life. With the right attitudes, all of your future "stages of life" will be enjoyable and fulfilling. High school is the beginning of your life's adventure as an adult.
- Study to learn, to strengthen your judgment, not just to do well on tests. You will eventually forget most of the "material"—and an education is what you have left over after you've forgotten the material. What really counts is what happens inside your mind, will, and heart. Your whole educational experience, in high school and college, should lead you to grow in several important areas: strength of discerning judgment, understanding of history and present events, insight into people, ability to concentrate, ability to control your time (i.e., self-control), ability to make distinctions and solve problems persistently, ability to get along with people of different backgrounds and personalities, the power to take responsibility for the professional quality of your work.

- Work to get in good physical shape with habits of physical exercise. If you get into good shape by the time you're 16, you'll probably stay that way for the next 30 years.
- Get to know your teachers and get them to know you—and to respect you for your competence, character, drive, and honorable ambition. In a few years, some of them can and will write recommendations important for college admissions and your career. They can only do this if they know and respect you. (Only immature, childish adolescents see their teachers as adversaries.)
- Learn to write clearly and convincingly. Listen to your teachers' advice about your writing and take this advice seriously. Pretend that every essay of yours is a letter, something from you personally to some friend; this approach makes your writing easier and much more interesting. Always read your work aloud to yourself before submitting it; goofs are more easily spotted this way. In other words, use your high-school years to find out where your writing needs improvement. Don't wait until your first job to learn this; it could hurt your career, and therefore your ability to support your family.
- When it comes time to choose elective courses (if you have this option in school), then choose on the basis of the teacher, not course content. That is, ask around to find out who the very best teachers are and then sign up for their courses. (This advice goes for college, too.) The best teachers will challenge you intellectually and personally, and their courses will probably be interesting. (That's interesting, not entertaining—and you should know the difference.) Moreover, their courses might open up new avenues toward a career. Many professionals first launched their careers by studying under excellent teachers.
- Early on in high school, take one or more so-called "career aptitude" tests to give some direction toward your future professional career. Why wait until college to start thinking along these lines? In addition, try to meet and chat with people—friends of parents and teachers—who are working in a field that seems appealing to you. To meet and chat with adults like this takes poise and some courage for people your age, but the exercise is excellent for firming up your judgment and ability to deal graciously with people. (Adults are usually impressed with high-schoolers who show such initiative and maturity, and they're generally glad to help and give experienced advice. Who knows? You might even secure a substantial, pre-professional summer job this way.)
- Plan to study one modern foreign language thoroughly, to the point where you're nearly fluent. Twenty or thirty years down the road, you'll be glad you can speak at least one foreign language. Aside from broadening your cultural formation, you will have another "power" to add to your professional life. The U.S. will increasingly do business on an international basis; so your ability to deal with a foreign language will be a big plus for you and give you an added competitive advantage.
- Join one or more extracurricular activities, and aspire to assume leadership therein. If possible, start your own activity—something needed in your school community. Start small, work with a team of like-minded friends, have a spirit of service. This way of operating is excellent practice for your later professional work.
- If you're not exceedingly proficient in team athletics, try out one of the individual sports or the ones less popular among people your age—golf, tennis, cross-country, squash, gymnastics, etc. Some of these you can play all your life. And bear in mind that competitive colleges need experienced players for these athletics; your proficiency might help you get into the college you want, or even boost your chances for financial aid. (Competitive colleges don't want a well

rounded student. They want a well rounded class. This they get by admitting able students who have, in addition to brains, some specialized skills. The tennis and squash teams need incoming freshmen to replace their graduating seniors. This is how it works. So, plan accordingly.)

- Develop a habit of worthwhile reading. Give special attention to history and biography. Ask people whom you respect (including your best teachers) for recommendations. Substantial reading gives depth to your judgment about people and events. Keep “junk” reading to a minimum, just as you should avoid “junk” entertainment of any kind.
- You will study more efficiently, and often in less time, if you:
 - (a) remain in the state of grace through sacramental confession: a clean conscience leads to peace of mind, which is vital for concentration.
 - (b) study to learn and to think, not just to memorize “facts”
 - (c) work consistently in one well equipped work area—with dictionary, supply of scrap paper, adequate light, supportive furniture (especially chair with arm-rests), calendar and assignment notebook (just like in professional life), files for holding onto important papers.
- When you are assigned term projects or any other significant writing, strive for originality. Think small. That is, try to find a subject that’s somewhat unusual, something broad enough to research fairly easily but small enough to be manageable and engaging to read. Strive to make your project the most interesting one in your class; your teacher will be grateful for this, because reading through a pile of “generic” projects is exceedingly tedious. After you’ve received the project back from your teacher, save it in your files. Later, a couple of years down the road, you may want a recommendation from this teacher—and you can remind him/her of this fine paper, among other tasks you’ve successfully done. (Who knows? You might even be able to expand on the research for the project later in college, in a similar course. If you already have an interesting topic, why work on something else from scratch?)
- Line up interesting summer jobs by getting out early—in January and February, no later than March. Even if your prospects don’t have anything available then, they will remember that you showed initiative and long-term planning, like a mature adult. Call back from time to time, to show your serious interest. (Bosses know that a serious and persistent job-applicant will probably be a serious worker as well.) If you wait until May, you will be competing against your peers who got in line ahead of you.
- Try to spend time, at least in the summer, working with the disadvantaged, using your health and education to be of service to them. Aside from the good you can do (which is substantial), you will learn how really well-off you are. You will avoid a common temptation among high-school age people: exaggerating your troubles and feeling sorry for yourself.
- If you’re interested in a couple of specific colleges, write now to get their catalogues and application forms or just check them out on the Internet. Study these. See what sort of credentials you’ll have to provide later—books read on your own, jobs you’ve had, recommendations you’ll need, what sort of essay you’ll have to write. Since these colleges seldom change their applications from year to year, you can now set out to become the kind of applicant they’re most looking for. Long-term strategic planning is one of the keys to success in life. Get used to it, and get moving now. It’s your future.