

## Chapter 2 -Maturity<sup>1</sup>

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Maturity is about reaching one's God-given potential. It means maximizing our skills and talents, and using them effectively, while growing into the full capability of our individual designs.<sup>2</sup>

The information on maturity found in this chapter is the result of over 20 years of observation, research and experience. Jim Wilder was initially troubled by the fact that few people he encountered actually understood the fundamental tasks required to mature – and those who did understand usually could not produce words to teach it to others. Fortunately for us, he was inspired by the fact that important pockets of information from theology, psychology, medicine and neurology exist on the subject of maturity. So the study and synthesis began, and what you have before you is an introduction to those findings.

Chapter 1 introduced us to the idea that having sufficient joy strength lays the foundation for all other maturity and growth. Interestingly enough, a house with a faulty foundation can “look good” on the outside for several years, but eventually time, weather and stressful conditions will reveal the deficiency, and the house will begin the painful process of collapsing. Similarly, people without proper joy strength, which means an underdeveloped “joy center” in the right side of the brain, can appear “just fine” for the first 20 or sometimes even 30 years of life, but eventually life's wear and tear reveals the faulty construction, and the painful process of collapsing begins.

A house without a firm foundation, for example, cannot withstand the stress of a hailstorm or an earthquake, nor can it survive the pressure of remodeling. Similarly, a person without a firm joy foundation cannot withstand the stress of breakups or losses, nor survive the pressure of growth and maturity.

As you can see, laying foundations is vitally important work. Any architect knows that a good foundation contributes to the success and longevity of the entire building. So what happens then, you may ask, for those who did not get their joy foundation properly laid in the beginning? Are their chances for recovery and maturity completely destroyed?

Well, fortunately for us, during the last five years, neuroscience has made enormous strides in research, allowing us to answer this question. As we learn from emerging science and developmental research, we are always struck with God's infinite majesty

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<sup>1</sup> Wilder, E. James; Friesen, James G.; Bierling, Anne; Koepcke, Rick; Poole, Maribeth. *Living From The Heart Jesus Gave You: 15th Anniversary Study Edition* (pp. 33-50). Shepherd's House, Inc.. Kindle Edition.

<sup>2</sup> See *Living With Men* by Jim Wilder, for an expanded discussion of maturity.

and splendor. In His omnipotent wisdom God knew there would be deficiencies, so He created the brain with the capacity to compensate. While most of the brain stops growing at certain stages of development, the brain's "joy center", located in the right orbital prefrontal cortex, is the only section of the brain that never loses its capacity to grow! It is the one section of the brain that retains the ability to grow for our entire lives, which means that "joy strength" can always continue to develop!

What makes it grow, you may ask? It grows in response to real, joy-filled relationships. We are not talking about casual, superficial relationships here. But when people are engaged in authentic, bonded relationships showing real joy ("I'm delighted to be with you!"), this section of the brain will grow at any age! And while this brain growth is slower than during the optimum developmental periods, the bottom line is this – new foundations can be laid, damaged ones can be repaired, and stalled maturity does not have to remain impaired.

### **A Village and a Family**

Life in community is best when people have life-giving relationships with those in all the other stages of life. Infants need older children, adults, parents, and elders around them in order to learn the lessons that help each infant progress to life's next stage. The same is true for people in all the other stages. Elders need infants as much as infants need elders. We all need to have positive relationships with people in each of the other stages in order to achieve success in the stage of life we are in.

Maturity never ends, and people need ongoing family and community relationships to stay unstuck in maturity. People need to know who they are, and they need to be frequently reminded of who they are by those who love them. As we will see in Chapter 4, belonging to a family is for everyone, especially for widows, orphans, those without children, and single people.

The 1996 American presidential campaign entertained a heated debate between Republicans and Democrats, arguing whether it takes a family or a village to best raise a child. We are here to say, after carefully studying the conditions that affect human maturity, that we are convinced beyond a doubt it takes both a village and a family to most successfully raise a child.

### **Maturity Stages**

Here is an overview of the maturity stages. A person's physical age does not determine his or her maturity level, but the satisfactory completion of the maturity requirements does. Each stage includes all the needs and tasks of the previous ones. The

ages listed indicate when the tasks can first be achieved. They cannot be achieved ahead of time, but they can be made up later in life if there are deficiencies.

**Infant (0 - 3).** Throughout this discussion we use the term “infant” broadly to include both children and adults, in the 0 – 3-year-old stage of development.

The infant’s fundamental need is to receive unconditional love and care. Receiving always precedes giving. We will never be able to effectively give until we have received. When our fundamental dependency needs have been met, we are motivated to become independent and start caring for ourselves. If our primary dependency needs are not met, we will spend the rest of our lives trying to get others to take care of us. Therefore, for most of this stage, parents need to supply the infant’s needs by recognizing when the young person needs to be fed or hugged or comforted or rocked to sleep. Training and discipline are necessary as the baby enters toddlerhood, of course, but good training does not undermine the overriding need for the 0 – 3 child to learn to receive.

As already stated, joy development is the foundation of this first stage. Infants need to be the “sparkle in someone’s eye” and to be with people that are “glad to be with them” so that they live in joy and learn that joy is one’s normal state. These conditions actually grow the “joy center” of the brain that will have “executive control” over their emotional systems for the rest of their lives. While most of the first year of development is committed to building joy, the child over 12 months begins the important task of returning to joy from every unpleasant emotion.

Some infants are “high need” babies and need parents who respond to their signs of desperation by delivering as much life as is needed. While ignoring baby’s cries in an attempt to control the crying may get them to stop crying, this approach does not provide the safety or comfort that are vital to their future adult development.

Developing trust through bonding with parents is also crucial during this stage. This bonding requires time, touch and togetherness with both parents invested and involved. Infants also begin the process of developing pictures of who they are in this stage, based on images of other significant faces looking at them. When an infant is surrounded by others who see her in the same way God sees her, the person she was designed to be, these faces will communicate to her at a very young age her value and importance.

“Adult infants” who have not received in these important areas as babies, will always be needy as adults. They will not be able to take care of themselves emotionally nor will they be able to appropriately receive important things from others. Adult infants will not ask for what they need because they believe if others really cared for them, they would figure out what they needed. Adult infants cannot handle criticism even if it is valid and

constructive, because they see any negative feedback as a personal attack. They are often possessive of relationships, territory, power and possessions. Unfortunately for all involved, they also use fear bonding to ensure others will stay bonded to them. And while “high functioning” adult infants can appear responsible in many areas, like handling personal finances, and being punctual and reliable, emotionally they are severely crippled making it very difficult for them to have successful and enduring relationships.

**Child (4 - 12).** When the infant learns to say what is needed, that marks a transition to the next stage. It is cause for celebration when a child can leave babyhood behind and begin learning to care for self. As the child moves toward puberty, it is still important to receive love without earning it. Rewards are to be earned, but not love – it is to be unconditional. Whenever a child is required to take care of a parent, things are backwards. Although “parentified” children who have to physically or emotionally take care of adults can appear mature on the outside, their needs are not being sufficiently filled and this will at some time impair their emotional development, leaving deficiencies.

Learning to care for oneself requires the mastering of several personal tasks. (1) A child must learn to say what he thinks and feels and appropriately ask for what is needed. When adults have not learned how to do this they often are frustrated because their needs do not get met and their voices do not get heard. (2) Children must learn what brings them satisfaction. If people never learn what satisfies, others will determine what is satisfying for them. (3) Children need to learn how to do hard things. This requires developing patience and persistence, and takes some guidance. Unfortunately for all, there is a current “entitlement” trend in America. It erroneously suggests that if you are worthwhile, you will not have to do hard things. This misconception goes against all conventional wisdom and severely limits the development of maturity. (4) Children need to develop their personal talents and resources. Otherwise, they are highly susceptible to filling their lives with unsatisfying and unproductive activities. (5) Self-care requires knowing yourself and making yourself understandable to others. (6) Children need to understand how they fit into history as well as the “big picture” of life. By studying their personal histories, children can understand the present better and be more effective in molding the future. When children understand the “big picture” of life, they realize that they have the ability to personally impact the world.

“Child adults” who have adult bodies but are emotionally at the child level of maturity, will always appear egocentric. Unlike “infant adults” who cannot take care of themselves, “child adults” can take care of themselves but they can only take care of themselves – and often that is at the expense of others.

**Adult (13 - birth of first child).** You will know when a person has graduated from the child level of maturity to the adult level because he will shift from being a self-centered child to a both-centered adult. While a child needs to learn me-centered fairness (how do I make it fair for me), an adult learns we-centered fairness (how do I make it fair for us). Mutuality is the trademark of an adult because he can take care of two people at the same time.

When people with adult bodies are functioning below the adult level of maturity, you will know because in the end your interactions with them will never feel mutual. You will go away feeling like in order to maintain a relationship with them you will always need to give more, listen more or tolerate more than they would ever be willing to do for you.

Adults know how to remain stable in difficult situations and can return self and others to joy. People who cannot do this will either avoid, escape or get stuck in certain emotions, crippling many of their endeavors and relationships. For example, if I avoid all anger, it eventually explodes into rage. If I get stuck in shame and failure, I may become depressed or even suicidal. And if I escape pain and rejection by doing drugs or having a sordid affair, I've only increased my misery and suffering.

Bonding with peers and developing a group identity are also important adult tasks. Young adults thrive when they are allowed to use appropriate power, gain success in peer relationships, and seek truth and fairness for their society.

Having the opportunity to effectively contribute to and be a part of a vital community are also necessary. Being part of something bigger than "me" is both empowering and inspiring.

Lastly, an adult needs to express the characteristics of her heart in a deepening personal way. Once people know who they truly are and understand the power and beauty of their God-given characteristics, their passion, purpose, talents, and pain will all come together and begin to define specifically who they are. The better they can express their unique identities in their words and actions, the more positioned they will be for speaking and living truthfully.

**Parent (first birth until youngest child becomes an adult).** Biologically being a parent does not automatically put you at the parent stage of maturity. In fact, many parents are not at this level. You know that you are at the parent stage, however, when you can sacrificially care for your children without resenting the sacrifice or expecting to receive anything for your efforts. You may feel exhausted or overwhelmed at times, but you still will be able to appreciate, not begrudge, your sacrifice. Unfortunately, an

“entitlement” philosophy also pervades modern parenting. “I’m entitled to do all the things I was doing as an adult, and I should not have to make any sacrifices of time, money or social activities.” We want to be clear here. Parenting does involve sacrifice, but it is not about giving up who you are. It is about becoming who you are!

*It is vitally important for parents to learn how to protect, serve and enjoy their families.* When a parent is doing all three, everyone in the family will be fulfilled. Balancing these three requires support from the community and guidance from mature parents who have already paved the way.

Mature parents are also aware that they alone cannot provide everything their children will need. Therefore, these parents are wise in allowing and providing spiritual family members – other important people in their children’s lives who will help their children become the persons they were designed to be.

Additionally, mature parents will be able to bring their children through difficult times and return to joy from all unpleasant emotions. As you can see, the ability to return to joy is forever important.

In the end, mature parenting is about representing God to one’s family. When you accomplish that, you are ready to graduate to the final level of maturity.

**Elder (beginning when youngest child becomes an adult).** Sadly, most in our culture never make it to this level of maturity. This is unfortunate because the success of any country, community, school or church body will have a direct correlation to the presence of true elders who are guiding and advising. To qualify as an elder, one needs to have raised children to maturity and completed all the prior maturity tasks.

True elders can act like themselves in the midst of difficulty. They can also establish an accurate community identity by finding out what their community has been designed by God to be, rather than imposing what they would like it to be. Furthermore, true elders prize all community members and see them as God sees them – looking past their flaws and facades to see the persons they have been designed to be.

True elders are also willing and able to parent and mature the community. They are qualified to do this because they have learned from a lifetime of experiences. They can handle criticism and rejection, speak the truth even when it is not easy or popular, serve without being appreciated, encourage needed growth and change, delight in younger people’s skill and power, and place what is best for the community over personal fairness or preference.

Lastly, true elders realize that those without sufficient biological families need real, live, loving spiritual families to heal, to grow and to thrive. Therefore, true elders are

open to God's voice when He orchestrates a spiritual adoption, and are willing to give spiritual children the same unselfish care that they gave their own biological children.

### **Making the Transition Between Stages**

It is helpful for maturing people to understand that when the beginning of each new maturity stage approaches, anxiety increases substantially. For example, it is tough entering puberty (junior high school is loaded with anxiety) and it is also anxiety producing to enter any of the other stages, like launching the final offspring and becoming a true elder in the community. When the community knows that anxiety will undoubtedly accompany passages into the next stage, it helps people get through transitions. If such a naturally occurring problem is called something like "mid-life crisis," however, that does not provide much help with the anxiety. But knowing that anxiety is a normal part of passing between maturity stages allows a whole new energy that actually propels the transition process. With this fresh, needed energy, the problem can be identified – certain tasks from earlier stages may not be completed yet, which can certainly be anxiety producing. But the excitement of the growth coupled with the guidance from others who are more mature will allow the person to persevere through this anxiety barrier, and make it to the next stage. You can see why people need an entire community to get through life's transitions.

Maturity never finishes, and people never stop needing other people. They do best when they live in groups of families, made up of individuals who help each other get unstuck in the areas that block their progress. They know who they are, live from their hearts, and see each other as God sees them.

It is clear that there are lessons to be learned during each stage. Reaching the physical age where the next stage is supposed to begin guarantees only that the body will be ready; it guarantees nothing about the actual maturity level. When the body is ahead of the overall maturity level, problems can develop. Perhaps the most popular prototypic example of such a lag in maturity is seen in comics. A grown man is shown making childish mistakes, and we are supposed to laugh. And while it is comical to laugh at men who are depicted as children running around in grown bodies, it is not fun to be married to one. Many men are not given good training during infancy to learn to say clearly what they need or how they feel, and they may not know much about meeting the needs of others. That is not a joke – it is a problem that begs to be solved. It is good to begin finding the solution by correctly identifying the problem – unfinished maturity tasks. When they have identified the uncompleted tasks or needs, it is important to know that

people can catch up. But, there is more to learn about maturity before we take a look at catching up.

### **The Growth, Brokenness and Transformation Cycle**

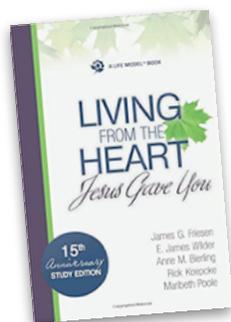
A pattern in maturity is essential in building a person's identity. It happens at transition points between life's stages, but it can also happen during growth periods. When it recurs, people understand themselves and others better, and therefore are better prepared to love. That is where the transformation cycle is supposed to lead. While growth is underway, tension builds over time, coming to a head, and there is a point where brokenness takes place. Without fear, the cycle leads to a transformation and a fresh appreciation of life. Perhaps an example from Jim Friesen's life would illustrate how this looks.

During the first two years he spent learning how to be therapeutic with people who dissociate, Jim found himself working very hard and growing, but sensing he was spinning his wheels. He had read that dissociative clients who stay in treatment tend to get better, but that was becoming more doubtful as he went along. A few did not stay in treatment, and some were getting much worse instead of better. He began to wonder if the therapeutic approach he was learning was correct. Eventually, he despairingly concluded that the material he was working so hard to learn was not actually helping people.

Anxiety was building. He had spent about twelve years striving to build an identity as a psychologist – getting the degrees, going through the licensing process, investing thousands of hours developing clinical skills, and then plunging into a specialty area, only to find that clinical psychology did not produce the expected results. Anxiety was appropriate to the circumstances. Brokenness was setting in, accompanied by despair and hopelessness. Recognizing he could not help these people using only psychological interventions, he decided to get training in how to use spiritual interventions along with the psychological principles he had already learned. The next two years found him being broken and transformed into a Christian who is a psychologist instead of a psychologist who is a Christian. He passed from the child stage of maturity, in becoming a therapist, to an adult. No longer was it enough for him to stick, in a child-like fashion, to “tried and true” therapy methods. His identity was turned into something completely new during this training – he gained confidence in the spiritual material, and was transformed into an adult who could understand people better and give them what their hearts needed – psychological and spiritual interventions that worked together. That was the cycle. The clients got unstuck, and so did he!

The transformation cycle can take place periodically throughout life, and is often accompanied by anxiety, depression or other new feelings. Transformations can follow healing or can take place during the completion of a normal maturity stage. Transformation gives a person a new identity when the old one is broken or too small. The pain can be very intense, but that is always part of the cycle that leads to wholeness. As the cycle is completed, a more fully developed self emerges, life skills increase, and so does joy.

Maturity demands that people honestly face their traumas, even when it is quite painful. Transformation is not achieved any way. The core experience of therapy is trauma recovery – allowing God to repair the brokenness, becoming transformed, and moving on to more growth. What therapy has to offer is to assist people in respectfully repairing their brokenness. Identity expands when the transformation cycle is completed, leading to higher levels of maturity.



*Living from the Heart Jesus Gave You* by James G. Friesen, Ph.D., E. James Wilder, Ph.D., Anne M. Bierling, M.A., Rick Koepcke, M.A., and Maribeth Poole, M.A. Copyright 1999, 2000, 2004, 2010, 2013, 2016 Shepherd's House, Inc.

The Life Model is a unifying approach to ministries of counseling, recovery, pastoral care, prayer ministry, deliverance, inner healing, child rearing, body life and health. Substance abuse recovery programs internationally are guided by the Life Model's five principles. Because the Life Model develops strong maturity, it is widely used as a church model, particularly where people must face suffering. Missions have adopted the Life Model for restoring hurt missionary children. Almost every major ministry dealing with trauma and abuse in the USA uses the Life Model as part of their teaching.