

# THE VANISHING AMERICAN ADULT

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Benjamin Eric Sasse aka Ben Sasse is a freshman Republican Senator from Nebraska. A doctorate in American History from Yale, Sasse was named President of Midwestern University, Fremont Nebraska in 2010.

Senator Sasse thinks that American youths have drifted away from the founding principles of American society. He feels that the coming of age rituals of learning the value of working with their own hands and leaving home to start a family and becoming economically self-reliant are being delayed or skipped altogether nowadays. The statistics do not make Americans like him happy: 30 percent of college students drop out after one year and only 40 percent graduate; a

is adolescence, 'a moratorium on adulthood'. It is understood to be finite, but its endpoints debatable. Endless adolescence is a calamity, because it is only meant to be a means to an end—adulthood.

In his words, America wasn't built to enable perpetual adolescence. American youths now need to be more gritty and resilient than those in the previous age. He thinks this is a challenge American society must take up!

In fact, coming of age is a trial for every society. Sasse sees the foreboding prospect of an American society that is not ready for the future because its youths are distracted and drifting. American parents are against the idea

bizarre, unhealthy and historically unprecedented. Most young people's time, he feels, is spent in age-segregated environment. This is marked by the peer culture of the school and by the narcissistic autonomy of digital world. Apparently, the US government spends \$620 billion on public and secondary school. There is however angst about what America is getting its return. He feels that adulthood has to steer away from overwhelmingly school-centric education. Sasse observes that it is a matter of concern that average American males played more than 14,000 hours of video games by the time they turn 21. They make them passive, intellectually fragile and obese!

Senator Sasse exhorts the young to discover the body—its potential and frailty, and the diverse stages of life that lie ahead. They need to appreciate the joys of birth and growth and the pain that comes with declining health. Death is the hardest reality but it's typical of young people to think themselves as indestructible. He feels that young adults are cut off from older generations and the reality of human frailty. By spending time only with people roughly their age, he feels that their understanding of life and death is severely attenuated!

**Embracing hard work:** Senator Sasse observes that American society is bizarrely trying to protect its young people from hard experiences! American youths should know that hard work is not to be avoided; it should be embraced. The only thing to do is "grin and bear it, to flinch as little as possible under the punishment, to keep pegging steadily away until the luck turns." He goes on to tell the reader how he arrived at young adulthood in the early 1990s assuming that work was a near-universal component of an American upbringing and maturation. During his five years at Midland University as its President it conducted surveys annually on the highs and the lows of students' university experience. Dispiritingly, students overwhelmingly highlighted their desire for *freedom from* responsibilities. They enjoyed sleeping, skipping class and partying!

In contrast, he notes how the founding fathers of America had an almost compulsive preference for productivity over passivity. In Benjamin Franklin's book *Poor Richard's Almanac*, Poor Richard says, "he that lives upon hope will die

fasting." The longheld American ideal is that work is a necessary component of becoming fully formed adult and that a life well lived entails a forward leaning embrace of responsibility.

**Consuming Less:** Senator Sasse observes that America knows that Americans consume exorbitant amounts of media every day, whether on television, on the internet, on tablets and smartphones. Contemporary studies from American psychologist and sociologists more or less say that consumption is not the key to happiness; *production* is. Consumption just consumes!

But Ben Sasse knows that "hard work produces wealth, which then produces leisure." However, across generations people drift to know only the leisure. Ruefully, the culture they breathe has transformed what used to be "wants" into norms and therefore "needs". He underscores the truth that work builds character.

**He asks ruefully:** where did America go wrong? A survey conducted by Notre Dame Sociologist Christian Smith on moral beliefs of 18- to 23 year olds found that 65% percent said that shopping and buying give them lot of pleasure. America is a consumer's paradise. The sociologist and his team found that the generation of emerging adults might be neglecting the difference between *need* and *want*. **Traveling to see:** "You can learn a lot about your culture by experiencing other cultures" -exhorts the Nebraskan Senator. He goes on to say that meaningful travel isn't about partying in Cancun or visiting tourist--only--parts of foreign ports of call. It is about engaging people in a culture who have assumptions about life, about economics, about the role of governments far different from America's.

There is a satisfying approach to traveling, Ben Sasse assures -- one that provides a valuable perspective on one's own life and the lives of others. He notes that like hard work, it is challenging; the goal here is *discovery*--which Americans can accomplish with big curiosity. He explains the observation by saying that the key distinction is between *active seeking* and venturing and learning on the one hand, and *passively taking* in the sights on the other hand. "The traveler [is] an active man at work" and by contrast "the tourist is passive."

Becoming truly literate: He wants to

know if young adults really know how to read, that is to say, read *well*? This is to read *critically* - and therefore to think critically. In contrast, he says Americans tend to skim. He regrets that literacy has been in absolute decline since the 1960s.

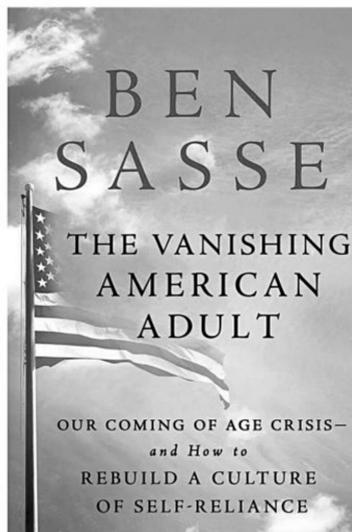
Senator Ben Sasse underscores the fact that America's future depends on the kind of thinking that reading presupposes and nourishes and that such thinking demands a rebirth of reading. He went on to say that becoming truly literate is a choice; reading done well is *not* passive activity like sitting in front of screen. And he reveals that according to the Bureau of Labour Statistics, the average American now reads only nineteen minutes per day!

Senator Ben Sasse urges young American Adults, "If you want to live a free and prosperous life, you need to be literate." Then he focuses on how from the middle of the twentieth century, television replaced papers and magazines as Americans' primary source of information. As a decision making device he settles for a personal list of 60 books: five books for each of the twelve categories. He will have a five feet shelf for his twelve categories. God; Greek Roots; Homesick souls (or, fundamental anthropology); Shakespeare; The American idea; Markets; Tyrants; The Nature of Things (or, a Humanistic Perspective on Science, American Fiction. These amount to nine but he leaves it to adult readers to debate and decide on the concluding categories.

Senator Ben Sasse concludes with the observation that the ancient Greeks and Romans distinguished between those who age like grapes into fine wine and those who age like grapes souring into vinegar. "We want future generations of Americans to mature, not sour." He eloquently goes on to say that American youth are to become tougher, not coarser; resilient not rigid; engaged in real life, not lost in "virtual reality; richer in experience, not embittered by it; leaders, not lemmings knocked around by fads and circumstance. That's adulthood rightly understood.

Something for us in Bangladesh to think about too!

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third of all 18- to 34-year olds live with their parents; and most young people over 13 are spending 60 percent of their waking hours consuming media.

Sasse observed such things from a close range when he was the President of Midwestern University and viewed them as threats to the American way of life. It was with such emotions in him that he wrote *The Vanishing American Adult*.

For every nation the path to adulthood has always been clear. It is a path of events and achievements. Ancient Roman law divided the three stages of life before adulthood into three seven-year segments: *infantia* (birth through age 6), *pueritia* (7 to 13), *pubertus* (14 to 20). The third stage

that their children should spend more time on institutional education.

Senator Ben Sasse's approach to the transition from dependence to self-sustaining adulthood is organized around five broad themes. These are: Overcoming peer culture; Working hard; Resisting consumption; Traveling to experience the difference between "need" and "want"; Becoming truly literate.

**Overcoming Peer Culture:** This is his prudent advice for overcoming the tyranny of the present. One basic way is to know other people, particularly older ones. And the other equally important way is to understand the reality of the body. He finds the hyper-generational segregation of the time

## Art and Poetry Makes Singing in Dark Times More Relevant

NABINA DAS

The poet may be the priest of the invisible if we are to concur with Wallace Stevens. When art and poetry intersect, the invisible suddenly turns into the visible truth and this visible art is the skein that keeps the freedom of expression foregrounded. For someone who has grown up with Sukumar Ray's rib-tickling *Ekushey Aaiin* (21 Laws) and *Ramgorur Chhana* (Ramgorur's Children) and the accompanying illustrations by the prolific poet, I realize our times need more

examination of all draconian laws as well. It's a relation I personally keep exploring -- between the words and the art that makes the reader-viewer's experience a more lived experience. It is rare but possible that an art magazine can feature excellence in all the aspects of art, aesthetics, and literature. Poet and editor, Bina Sarkar is passionate about visual, performance, photography, cinema, poetry and short stories "on a global scale." To channel her interests, *Gallerie* magazine was born in 1997 and has come a long way in showcasing the best of voices, some outright rebel. This year at its 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary, the magazine is 40 volumes old.

A sheer delight to flip through, among several well known names, *Gallerie* includes works from Balbir Krishan, Sarnath Bannerjee, Amar Kanwar, Shanta Gokhale, Astad Deboo, Waswo X Waswo, Nandita Das, K Satchidanandan, Priya Sarukkai Chabria, Sudeep Sen and many more -- a feast for the lovers of words and images.

Very recently, Raqs Media Collective, a Delhi-based artists group, collaborated with the Bonniers Konsthall in Stockholm, Sweden, to hold an exhibition themed on war and poetry. Raqs has long been engaged in conversations about art and literature,

and in a subversively creative manner.

The team worked with Theodore Ringborg of Bonniers Konsthall to curate "The Image of War." The entire showcasing is how we see "violence in images." Beginning September 20 and around till January 14, 2018, the exhibition houses 80 artists' work who "confront past or present conflicts."

This is where the collaboration has turned to poetry as another dimension in the documentation of violence or conflict.

In the words of Raqs -- who usually work as a collective -- the group felt that "we call poetry into existence when we feel a need to speak and listen acutely, and with a desire to conjure images and ideas that test the limits of language. If we think of war as a machete that cuts through thickets of conversation, then poetry—which insists on a persistent obduracy of utterance—acts as an active assertion against the collapse of language."

For artist and poet Sanjeev Khandekar, music, dance or visual art all have poetry as their common seed. He often uses a tone of cynicism and critique regarding current political issues in his social media posts of art works old and new and belonging to artists other than just himself. "It is the viewer who then deciphers the code of poetry hidden in a piece of art using the clues provided in a painterly manner," Khandekar said.

While for Sarkar art and poetry are entwined, and in dialogue with each other, Raqs believes that "poetry, which need not obey the syntax of the slogan, can confront this collapse (of language) by gifting us an awakened toolbox. Poetry can undertake the task of philosophy, and also of a mending of language and thought."

Hence the critical engagement of Raqs with the space shared by art and

poetry. They have edited a poetry book to mark their solidarity. According to Ringborg, the book -- titled *Read by, Written by* -- is where readers have been invited to share poems and poetic fragments that respond to currents of war as an "act of networked readership" resulting in a unique collection of texts.

Sarkar says that *Gallerie's* 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary issue emerged from a self-challenge. "Due to unfortunate reasons the 39<sup>th</sup> volume had to be postponed. Thus, the 39<sup>th</sup> and the 40<sup>th</sup> volumes

dialogue in art and poetry "ideas-oriented", starting with topics such as Race and War, Conflict, Migration, Seeking Peace, to Celebrating Books and the like. *Gallerie's* conceptual intention is to "lure readers outside the exclusive confines of the art and poetry spaces" according to Sarkar. "Therefore, over the years, our readership has grown substantially to include those outside these spheres ... encouraging a dissemination of knowledge and appreciation of the arts in more



came together as a double issue to celebrate our anniversary with 'Hope' and 'Peace', considering the increasing turmoil, hate-mongering and violence in India and the world today," Sarkar said.

At Bonniers' exhibition called *The Image of War*, artists "deal at once with violence and its image, posing crucial questions about what violent images create, what consequences they have, and how they circulate."

Sarkar's endeavor is to keep the

egalitarian spaces," Sarkar said.

What else poetry can do for artists? Raqs thinks that poetry can undertake the task of philosophy, and also of a mending of language and thought. "Perhaps we seek to insist, against the grain of Adorno's formulation, not on the impossibility, but on the necessity of poetry in the wake of atrocity," Raqs said.

In her 20 year-long journey, Sarkar has worn many hats other than just writing and publishing. Her

"Migration" issue was a curated project at the Pune Biennale from Jan 5-29, where Sarkar mounted a photography, films, art and poetry show in six shipping containers in a public space which was "immensely exciting and well-received."

Khandekar especially thinks the Dada artists were also into poetry to use the possibilities of the both the mediums to overcome the limitations of the both.

Conflict and war are issues that are complex and evoke contextual reactions, to be often explicated through poetry. Ringborg believes we turn to poetry when in need to speak and listen acutely, and with "a desire to conjure images and ideas that test the limits of language."

By 'war', Raqs suggests that these are conflicts "between states, overt or covert, camouflaged or performed as a spectacle, along with varying insurrections, and escalating counter-insurgency operations." "We see this happening all over the world, in the mines, in forests, in desert, in streets, in islands, in the sea, in workplaces, in neighborhoods, in camps, in schools, in universities," Raqs said.

Perhaps this is all best summed up in the words of young Kashmiri academic and poet Huzaifa Pandit whose work appears in *Read by, Written by*:

*Master*  
I petition to dye  
The soiled bowl of moon  
With the warm tint of that fateful  
spring. ("His Master's Voice; For Major  
Avtar Singh -- the murderer of Jaleel  
Andrabi")

Nabina Das is a poet and writer based in Hyderabad, India. She is the author of two poetry collections, a novel and a short fiction volume.