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Freedom and teenagers

Dennis Coday | Oct. 16, 2009 NCR Today

It must be because last night I attended my first parent-teacher conference as a parent of a high school, that I felt drawn to this essay by Christopher L. Doyle on the Education Week Web site: Growing Up Scripted: And Losing Freedom Along the Way [1].

> I propose a brief experiment in citizenship: Find a teenager and ask her if she thinks she will grow up to lead a free life. The results might give you pause. When I asked this of my upper-middle-class high school students recently, nearly every one of these 11th and 12th graders said "no."
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> The problem is that adolescents imagine adulthood as an extension of their own experience, and most see themselves as overworked, overregulated, and overstressed. They have a point. ?
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> My students appear bereft of role models for freedom. Most have heard of Henry David Thoreau, Jack Kerouac, or Walt Whitman, but they do not see such people as realistic examples for living. Who, really, can subsist in a homemade cabin on Walden Pond or spend life roaming the highways singing the body electric? Every year, I make it a point to introduce my classes to people who are largely free to pursue their own passions -- writers, dancers, painters -- but most kids come away feeling merely awestruck by the artists' talent and personality. It is hard to convince young people who have little firsthand experience with freedom, who read it as austere, uncomfortable, and implausible, that it is a legitimate aspiration. ?
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> Some people ? see the heightened prescription of childhood as a positive development. They argue that to remain economically competitive, American kids must learn the same kind of self-discipline that their counterparts in China or India have. They also assert that because many children grow up without "structure" at home, especially poorer kids in cities, school must be all the more regimented and authoritarian. Modern life is often chaotic, so I understand why advocates of regulated childhoods have an audience.
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> Yet, much evidence suggests that these "reformers" have it wrong, that imposing new layers of discipline onto American kids' lives will not lead to the production-oriented results they seek. We see, already, that the current state of prescription has produced a backlash: binge drinking is up, rates of mental illness among teenagers have risen, academic cheating is on the rise.

The essay left me with a lot to think about. You see, in my high school Thoreau, Whitman and Kerouac (with strong admonishes against drug use), were held up as role models -- along with St. Francis, Pope John XXIII, and Jesus of the Beatitudes. (We were a Catholic school after all.)

If you can't have wild dreams of freedom as teenager, what's the point of suffering through the teenage angst?

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Links:

[1] http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2009/10/14/07doyle.h29.html?tkn=PPZFBvRZ3nUselC6N3%2FU%2BX%2FYmVF