

School Violence and Adolescence – Reflections

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Violence in America has been a concern for some time now with the forces of the NRA, gun manufacturers, and the misguided 2nd Amendment fundamentalists battling the efforts of many groups to restrict access to the ultimate tool of individual violence, the gun [and especially the cheap handgun]. The same issue is at the center of efforts to restrain the media and video/computer game producers from exploiting the interest of young people in ever escalating graphic representations of violent behavior. These graphic games are especially insidious since they invite the game player to identify ever more closely with destructive behavior, in an ever more interactive format, for ever longer periods of time, and at ever younger ages.

The American tolerance for violence, real and vicarious, and the gun as a powerful and easily available instrument of violent expression are certainly legitimate concerns. America's continued tolerance for violence in the modern world setting is witness to the adolescent state of American culture, being not yet willing to grow up into responsible adulthood. Adolescents hunger for independence and individual freedom of expression, always with an edge for rebellion, and charged with the hormones to promote instant, unrestrained reactions. In a world characterized by ever more dense populations of people living in a more and more socially and economically integrated condition, mature societies have to exhibit a very low tolerance for violent physical behavior. In addition, they need to look with great disfavor on threatening verbal behavior. America is struggling with the requirements of growing up. Ironically, it is American democracy, technology and economy that have led the world to the condition where the level of integration required among all persons, communities and states is such that a laissez-faire approach to violence is no longer tolerable in the world which circumscribes America itself.

The recent spate of school violence is but one evidence of the adolescent condition of American culture in general. School violence in white, middle class, suburban communities merely gets the attention of the culture in a way that the same behavior in poor inner city, ethnic and racial communities does not, unfortunately. In this "up scale" setting, it is difficult to blame the "problem" on environment, class, race, or ethnicity. In the "expert" assessments that have emerged following these violent events in our public schools, a myriad of variables have been identified as causal: peer intolerance; lack of sufficient school supervision and security; lack of parental awareness, involvement and

control; the numbing effect of increased exposure to ever escalating violence in the media; easy access to guns; and minimal gun security. All of these variables are valid and contribute to the problem, but even collectively I do not think they are sufficient.

As a social scientist with an interest in artistic and spiritual matters, I suggest there are two issues that are more fundamental to the problem than the ones most often identified. The first is the acceptance of adolescence by most of western culture as a separate stage in the life course of the individual. Having accepted the separateness of this phase of social maturation, Americans have further permitted adolescents to define a distinct culture for themselves which largely lacks mature adult oversight. The second factor is America's failure to provide emerging adults with a spiritual [not religious] basis for a positive and secure sense of self.

Adolescence - A Recent Artifact of Western Culture

In most traditional societies, children are ushered into adulthood at or near the time of puberty. The mechanism for making the transition is an elaborate passage ritual during which the individual's identity is re-experienced and redefined in combined spiritual and social terms. Adults supervise throughout childhood and guide the transition process to adult status through ritual. Children and young adults are in the constant presence of mature adults from whom they learn the viewpoint and behavior of maturity in the fields, woods, shop, etc. What adolescent period there is is short, and rarely is there a separate adolescence, unattended by adults, especially no extenuated such period.

Adolescence as a separate phase in the individual's life course is a modern artifact of western culture. It has its roots in the western beliefs 1) that all individuals have the right to become what they want - regardless of what their parents may be or do and 2) that a relatively long period of abstract universal education in a setting separate from the adult world of family, relatives and neighbors is the best means for children and young adults to discover their way in this pursuit. Adolescence emerges as a full-blown, separate period in life when this extended education period moves from a rural agricultural location to the urban and suburban settings. In these latter settings, young people are no longer involved in practical and valued activities and have few opportunities to continue to learn directly from practicing adults and to significantly define their lives in terms of experiences with adults. While teachers lead the education process in classrooms, adults no longer model directly to young people the jobs their education is to lead to. A great many adolescents have only the vaguest idea of what their parents do occupationally. Add to this picture families where

both parents work outside the home, where technology [the pill] can replace parental vigilance in protecting young girls from pregnancy, and where family activities are weakened a) by conflicting individual schedules, b) by private spaces [rooms] and c) by a focus within the household on news and entertainment provided by outside media, and you have a situation that encourages the emergence of a very strong, and mostly separate adolescent subgroup.

In the course of the last two generations under the above circumstances, the strength of the adolescent subgroup has consolidated to the point where a separate adolescent culture has emerged with adults orienting media and consumer products to serve it. Outside of the classroom, this subgroup and subculture has become all consuming and all defining for adolescents to the point where its members reject most contact with parents and adults. When adults respond to this rejection by redefining it as the natural quest for space and independence by their children, the degree of adolescent separation becomes virtually complete. So long as adolescents attend school and come home with satisfactory report cards, the rest of their world is mostly theirs to define. In behalf of catering to their children's right to self-determination and independence, adults have abdicated all but the most basic controls.

While this separate adolescent social condition has been accepted as the norm over the course of the 20th Century, it is essential for everyone to recognize that it is new, artificial, and dangerous. The social identity of young adults is tenuous and fragile. Without adult supervision and guidance, adolescents are inclined to define a secure world for themselves where access to power and "popularity" are defined in very narrow terms, terms which are minimally tolerant of differences. In this setting, it is extremely easy for individual young people to become marginalized, and this can happen overnight and for the least imaginable reasons [the "wrong" hat, shoes, coat, haircut, etc.]. Adolescent peers can be incredibly intolerant, unbelievably demanding, and supremely influential. Those who vary slightly from the mold often experience themselves as outsiders, and those who display more apparent differences are very often ostracized and abused, sometimes mercilessly.

The fragile identity of adolescence covets the sense of being empowered, and it is here that drugs and the media enter the scene to feed adolescents with experiences of grandiose gratification and fantasies of rebellion and control over life and death. In the separate adolescent subculture, graphic expressions of violence in interactive contexts where the young person has the ability to control the consequences are the norm. Success in these "games" is measured in terms of the number of "enemies" vaporized by pulling the trigger on the "joy

stick." Often the only adult figures attempting to exercise some control in this virtual world are the ones being vaporized or eliminated in a stream of blood and guts. Drugs and media in moderation and in the context of adult presence and control are one thing, but in heavy doses and totally outside adult observation are an invitation to big-time, wide-spread trouble. Just allow that heretofore "normal" kid to be marginalized for a long enough time by his surrounding peer group, to immerse himself in drugs and violent media, and to locate a friend or two with easy access to guns to share in his anger and fantasies of retribution, and you have the adolescent recipe for asocial behavior, including violence, inside or outside of school. It does not take a history of domestic abuse, poverty, or a "broken" home to create the conditions for adolescent violence. These conditions just further motivate asocial and violent inclinations.

If we need an analogy from the animal world for the negative consequences of young adults being separated and left on their own to mature, consider what occurred when a group of adolescent elephants in Africa were separated from their herd and relocated to an area where elephants had been eliminated. The intent was to see these adolescent animals flourish and reestablish herds in the new location. What happened was that the adolescent animals failed to form herds defined by the usual matriarchal structure. Instead, they formed marauding bands which attacked other animals and exhibited such extreme and non-elephant like behavior that eventually they had to be destroyed. At the same time, the related adolescent elephants that remained with the original herd under the constant supervision of adult elephants in the matriarchy matured to take their normal roles as adult elephants in the herd. Just as there is no instinct for young elephants, when left on their own, to mature into responsible adults as defined by herd "culture," so it is with young human adults. As it turns out, the "lord of the flies" syndrome from fiction is not that far from the facts. To cite a related phenomenon, what else is the much touted "boot camp" rescue for aberrant teens but an enforced approach to re-integrating adolescents into a society where adults have the power and adolescents have no choice but to learn to adopt the roles and play by the rules of the adults who closely supervise and control them. What we need to realize is that we are the ones who have allowed our adolescents to "go wild," and it is we who must reclaim adult authority and supervision in the same constant, constructive and benevolent fashion as characterizes the normal elephant herd.

Socially, the answer to the current adolescent "problem" is to do what it takes to eliminate the separate adolescent condition for America's young people. We must realize that we have created this adolescent condition; it is not "the way things are," and we can at a minimum severely alter the shape it takes. In the

process, adolescents must be re-integrated into adult society on an ongoing basis. They can not be allowed to define their own world on their own terms for an extended period of time. It just doesn't work; and if we give the matter much thought at all, we should not expect it to work. The young adult's world must return to one oriented to adults and supervised by adults where young people participate with adults in real activities [not just symbolic events like sports]. Education must be less abstract and isolated and more experiential and of an internship, or "apprenticeship" nature - in the real world of adults, with real compensation for the value of the young person's effort. Regardless of school size, opportunities must exist for all young people to identify and cultivate their talents, to discover the niches where they can excel and be respected for their different talents and abilities.

We must not allow "popularity" among young people to be narrowly defined and reserved for the privileged few. Respect for differences in others must be absolute - so long as the differences do not impinge on the legitimate rights of others. Peer hazing and teasing must be met immediately with suspension, and if continued, with expulsion from school. A "get tough" policy of zero tolerance for drugs and weapons must be matched by zero tolerance for intolerance and a very low tolerance for exposure to even vicarious violence. The media cannot be permitted to feed the festering wound of adolescent anger just because there is a lot of money to be made and a first amendment right to hide behind. We must insist that the individual right to free expression does not extend to the point where the fundamental social fabric is put at substantial risk. Individual rights and freedoms must be balanced against social commitment, security, and responsibility.

If we redefine the student social experience in the ways mentioned above and re-integrate adolescents into adult society, many of the social factors which currently undercut the adolescent's self-esteem and motivate and provide the medium for adolescent anger and violence to grow will be eliminated or severely curtailed. When this new education experience becomes the norm, there will be less need to focus on variables of external containment [metal detectors and campus police] which are not the real answer and which have the unfortunate effect of transforming the creative environment of schools into the punitive condition of secured compounds.

Spirituality, Subjectivity and the Sacred

While much can be accomplished by attending to the social factors which account for the problematic emergence of adolescence as a separate life phase and culture, it is also necessary to consider the loss of spiritual connection in American culture as a whole and in the culture of young people in particular.

This loss compounds the difficulty young people face in the search for a positive sense of self. Identities are potentially fragile at all stages of life, but fragility in adolescence is more dangerous to society than in either childhood or adulthood. The tantrums of children do not have the scale of effect that the rampages of adolescents have, while estranged adults are likely to focus their asocial behavior in criminal activities that are not intended to call attention to themselves. Adolescents are betwixt and between childhood and adulthood and when allowed to drift in a world defined by their intolerant peers can easily have their fragile identities severely wounded with no constructive outlet for the expression of the confusion and anger which accompanies the scarring.

Identity defined by material existence and objective reality alone is uncertain at best, whatever life phase one is talking about. In this context, American culture is all the more vulnerable since it defines identity throughout life almost exclusively in these physical, intellectual terms. Subjective, spiritual reality is denigrated and denied influence in all but the "peripheral" activities of art and religion. So, when the whims of the material, physical, social world challenge the identity of most Americans, they have no fall back position and the self is fully exposed to the blows of the moment.

Traditional cultures define reality in spiritual, subjective and sacred as well as material and objective terms. The result is that identity and self-esteem are not so vulnerable. We need to take from these cultures a recognition of the "sacred" thread that runs through all of life and reality, while not accepting their particular religious interpretations and definitions of the sacred. Indeed, there are severe restrictions and limitations that accompany traditional spirituality in the form of religious institutions with their dogma and ritual. It is these limitations which western culture recognized when it insisted on the separation of church and state and removed the spheres of politics, economy, law, and intellectual pursuit from the impact and control of religious dogma - while allowing for the separate freedom of religious expression by individuals and groups. But in the process of excluding religion from input into the definition of everyday events and reality, western culture also excluded the input of the more fundamental subjective, spiritual experience which lies at the core of all traditional religions, whatever their particular, problematic dogma and ritual may be. We won in excluding the peculiarities and narrow mindedness of religion. We lost in excluding at the same time the underlying principle of spirituality and the subjective and sacred experiences of life and reality.

If we carefully reclaim and reintegrate the spiritual and the sacred into our everyday culture and lives, we have much to gain. The problematic and tenuous nature of adolescent identity is but one major area that would benefit.

Identity that is grounded in the spiritual experience of unification [transcendence, enlightenment, etc.] is much less subject to the whims of external experience. In unification, the individual experiences self as other, as indistinguishable from other persons and things, and as part and parcel of these others. In its extreme form, self-identity is fused with all other things in the identity of the whole, and separateness itself disappears. Self and the whole are one at a fundamental level, and discreteness in time and space as experienced by the limited senses in objective reality is illusory. The notion of a sacred thread running through and connecting all things is merely one way to characterize in description appropriate to objective reality the understanding which emerges as a result of the unification experience. The unification experience is intuitive and emotive, not intellectual. It is experienced internally and subjectively as an extraordinarily decisive feeling and knowing. In its extreme form it is absolute and beyond challenge. Identity that is experienced as fundamentally connected and shared is secure in a way that momentary experience in the objective world cannot dispute. Individuals whose cultures encourage them to grow from childhood into an ever deeper experience of unification as young adults have a much less fragile sense of self than individuals whose cultures fail to encourage this awareness and growth.

I contend that the subjective unification experience is as real as being hit on the head with a stone is in objective reality. The two events just occur and are perceived at either end of a continuum of reality revealed by different states of mind. Potential complications of great magnitude arise when the institutions of objective reality and culture step in to interpret and give definition and meaning to the unification experience. It is at this point that most cultures offer a very narrow and self-serving interpretation of the experience and claim it as exclusively affirming their society and as only revealed through their set of beliefs and rituals. In this way religions arise to encapsulate the spiritual experience and reduce its universal implications for identity to the affirmation of a particular group committed to a particular set of beliefs and associated rituals. Once the intense experience of unification is reduced to a narrow social and religious view, the consequence is typically a powerful commitment to the specific group and its beliefs. Ironically this narrow commitment can become the basis for some of the most horrific human behavior, expressed toward those who are not part of the "chosen" group and committed to the "truth" of its beliefs and rituals.

The universal spiritual experience of unification is real and very important. The limitation of religious interpretation of the unification experience has nothing to do with the legitimacy or importance of the experience itself. This is where western culture, including most emphatically American culture, missed the point

in tossing out spirituality along with religion when it excluded the sacred as a fundamental input in everyday life and in the pervasive sense of self.

We can re-incorporate into western culture the spiritual together with growth into the depths of the unification experience (the transcendent experience or the experience of enlightenment). And we can do this without the negative effects of narrow religious and social interpretations. In the process we can reassert the whole of self, reality and culture, and provide young people with a much more secure overall sense of self. This subjectively confirmed identity is much less prone to respond to the unfortunate whims of the world in terms of angry and violent behavior. This is true whether or not we address the social problems of having allowed the emergence of a separate adolescent life phase and culture.

If we want to really attend to the problem of adolescent violence in our schools and adolescent anomie in general, we need to make progress on both the social and spiritual fronts. That is the view from where I sit.