

Healing the Wounded Adolescent

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ABSTRACT

Drawing together various studies in media, psychology and pastoral ministry, the author analyses current youth culture with particular focus on the wounded adolescent within “Generation Txt”. She argues that Christian family counselling agencies and youth ministries are needed to create an extended family culture for wounded adolescents and their families. An earlier version of the paper was presented at the Melbourne 2007 Conference of *The Association of Practical Theology in Oceania*. [Editor]

INTRODUCTION

Many New Zealand teenagers are lost to violence and drug abuse. The Justice Ministry reported a 39% increase in youths committing violent crime in 2006. Suicide is the second leading cause of death in young people (after motor vehicle crashes), and accounts for approximately 25% of all deaths of young people aged from 15 to 24 years.

In 1998 Judith Rich Harris proposed a theory to explain why, in a family where other siblings are faring well, one teenager may be attracted to peers whose values differ radically from their parents. Harris asked researchers in child development a question which poses a challenge to practical theology: How can we break the vicious cycle of aggressive kids becoming more aggressive when they get together with others like themselves?

This paper is a conversation between media studies, human development theory, mythology and pastoral ministry. A special focus is on the unique characteristics and challenges represented by “Generation Txt”. Because cellphones enable adolescents to establish ‘secret networks’ off limits to parents, they may exacerbate whatever conflicts already exist within the family. I will argue the need for Christian family counselling agencies and youth ministries to create an extended family for wounded adolescents and their families.

YOUTH CRISIS IN NEW ZEALAND

Almost daily, New Zealanders are assailed with images of teenagers involved in crime. In a report focusing on youth crime, the Justice Ministry revealed a 39% increase in violent crime in 2006, with violent offenses increasing from 2690 in 1995 to 3743.¹ Another report

stated that young women's binge-drinking is now matching males, with girls drinking to "get smashed" and leaving themselves vulnerable to sexual assault, robbery and violence.² Yet another reported that a 14-year-old was pulled over by police because he was driving drunk at 3.35 a.m. with a reading of 695 mg. blood alcohol level.³ (The NZ norm is 80 mg.) Finally the Canterbury Suicide Project revealed that suicide is the second leading cause of death in young people in New Zealand (after motor vehicle crashes) and accounts for approximately 25% of all deaths of young people aged from 15 to 24 years.⁴

These statistics are mind-numbing. What is happening to these young people during one of the most critical times of their development? Why aren't they working hard at school or playing sport? Why aren't they making a vision quest in New Zealand's majestic native bush?

Many committed New Zealanders working with 'at risk' youth have been asking these questions for some time. This paper is yet another attempt to understand some of the causes of adolescent antisocial behaviour and suggest some modest solutions. Here we hope to bring into dialogue the disciplines of media studies, human development studies, mythology and pastoral ministry.

GROWING UP IN THE 21st CENTURY

The transition from childhood to adult society has always been a challenging time in a person's life. Adolescence is typically a time of rebellion against adult authority as young people pull away from parents in order to establish their own identity. But it need not be a time of trauma -- either for teenagers or their parents.

The role of parents is to support the emerging young adult in his/her quest for a unique identity, independent of them and yet related in terms of their overriding values. Parents are to listen to their children's dreams and goals, advise them, be there to support them, and yet allow them to make the important decisions in their lives. This is the theory. Yet the practice can often be quite different.

I submit that this important dialogue is not taking place because many parents are not able to be *elders*, and therefore cannot accept the most crucial responsibility of being a parent, which is to embody wisdom.

When families were still embedded in a village culture, other capable adults were able to assume responsibility for raising children. Even today, when at least an extended family is intact and functioning adequately, capable relatives are able to step in and care for a child

who is not faring well at home. This is because the extended family views all children in the family as their own.

Today, however, both extended family and village have collapsed, and parents are often on their own coping with the challenges of raising children in one of the most violent and chaotic eras of human history.⁵ Indeed, an appalling aspect of contemporary violence is that we have come to accept it as normal. In fact, if I might borrow Stuart Sellar's phrase, we can speak of the "metanarrative of violence"⁶ that permeates our culture and saturates our children's view of the world in the media. I will analyse three elements of the "violence matrix"⁷ that has invaded the culture of adolescents with the explicit purpose of corrupting them.

Of the three types, structural violence is institutional and systemic. Interpersonal violence is defined by the violence between and among individuals and groups while intrapersonal violence is defined as violence directed toward the self. (James, Johnson, Raghavan, Lemos, Barakett and Woolis, 2003:131)

The authors of "The Violence Matrix" also describe "the innermost or microsystem level of structural violence, which refers to the collective psyche... violence at this level is displayed psychologically. Psychological violence occurs when other forms of structural violence become accepted, promoted, and integrated into the collective psyche often forming stereotypes about particular groups." (ibid. p. 132)

The Impact of Media and Technology

Psychological violence includes the effects of media and technology on impressionable adolescents. The *interpersonal* levels of violence include family and community breakdown, and the *intrapersonal* levels of violence include whatever toxic substances adolescents ingest in order to deal with their situation, however inappropriately. This violence is enabled by both our society and its technologies. I will discuss some examples briefly.

A Culture of Violence

We live in an age of violence and danger. Cinema and television have become agents of corruption. The media markets violence - in images, music, news- to the most avid target audience: our adolescent daughters and sons. I recall the movie *Mr. and Mrs. Smith* starring Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie, both professional assassins leading secret lives, even from one another.

No, I did not watch this movie. I watched the people who were watching it on Air New Zealand when I was travelling to the United States to visit my family. I watched twenty minutes and was so repelled I could not watch any more. But everyone around me was watching it -- young and old, men and women -- *and the teenagers were mesmerized*. Since Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie have enormous 'cultural capital' among young people, I wondered what was going through their minds as they watched these celebrity icons killing people for profit and then taking aim at each other.

The world mediated to teenagers via movies, rap and hip-hop music and most other popular entertainment is dark, ugly and violent. Hurtful, exploitative relationships dominate the movie industry and adolescents observe their culture heroes use one other for sex, status, and money. Furthermore, all this is presented to them as "normal". In *The Nurture Assumption: Why Children Turn Out The Way They Do*,⁷ child psychologist Judith Rich Harris writes:

I believe the media's glamorization of violence - or, what might even be worse, their banalization of violence [emphasis mine] - is the source of much of the increase in criminal behavior over the past thirty years. The children of San Andres grew up thinking that aggressive behavior is normal because that's how a lot of the people in their village behaved. The children of North America and Europe grow up thinking that aggressive behavior is normal because that's how a lot of the people on their television screens behave. Kids bring these notions with them to the peer group and, since their peers live in the same village or watch the same shows, they incorporate them into the norms of their group. People in our society, they think, are supposed to behave that way. (Harris,1998: 284)

If young people have not been taught by their parents to work through conflicts constructively, they will probably emulate behaviour they see on television.

A World Without Limits

In "Flat and Happy", media studies scholar Todd Gitlin writes:

... television's largest impact is probably as a school for manners, mores, and styles -- for repertoires of speech and feeling, even for the externals and experiences of self-presentation that we call personality. This is not simply because television is powerful but also, and crucially, because other institutions are less so. (Gitlin,1993: 49)

From the time children sit in front of the television set, they learn the basic facts of life in the post-modern world: we live in a world without limits or moral boundaries. If you have enough money, you can buy whatever you want and do whatever you want. You can even commit murder if you can afford a high powered lawyer to get you acquitted. Forget about

right and wrong; these concepts are quaint and meaningless. We live in the postmodern world; all meanings and values are socially constructed.

As a matter of fact, since most young people have money, they are targeted by the mass media and advertising industry as a 'growth market'. The goal is to make them consumers as young as possible. The word 'enough' is never heard in popular culture. The media and advertisement industry teach young people that they never have enough, and so they continually want more.

Consider also the impact of Reality TV, where shows like *Temptation Island* recruit young people who crave celebrity status and subject them to the crassest humiliation and degradation. Young people will do anything to win. They will undermine one another and even prostitute themselves. Celebrity status matters more than human decency. In *God's Politics: Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It*, Jim Wallis observes:

The real enemy here isn't sex, but rather the commodification of everything - turning all values into market values, gutting the world of genuine love, caring, compassion, connection, and commitment for what will sell, for example, on a television show. (Wallis, 2005: 680)

Harris, Gaitlin and Wallis may be American thinkers echoing the venerable Frankfurt school critiques of commodity culture, but since New Zealand has imported American popular culture, I am on safe turf in sharing their insights and observations about how television and movies affect the collective psyche of adolescent New Zealanders.

Cellphones and Secret Networks

Of all the technologies that have captured the minds and hearts of adolescents, cellphones may be viewed as less dangerous than the potential for abuse via chat rooms, for example, in which hapless teenagers can be lured into horrendous situations. For the purpose of this paper, however, I will discuss only the impact of cellphone technology because of its huge influence in shaping the personality of an entire generation of young people. It has also played an immense role in influencing the dynamics of contemporary family life.

My 21-year-old daughter's generation got their first cellphones when they were 15 years old. She, like many teenage girls, spent countless hours texting her 'mates'. But they were also able to focus on other things, like school and family. The cellphone was a part of their lives, but did not dominate them.

A mere three or four years later, members of my 17- year- old daughter's generation, however, have had a very different relationship to their cellphones. The cellphone seemed more like an appendage to their bodies than a tool of communication. It is with them at all times -- day and night, disturbing their concentration on important tasks during the day, and their sleep at night. I was not surprised, therefore, when I came across references to 'Generation Txt', in my research for this paper.⁸

Cellphones enable adolescents to establish 'secret networks' that are off limits to parents. The text message is the medium that makes this possible. The 'secret network' exacerbates whatever conflicts already exist within the family. By the time parents and teenagers have the opportunity to discuss whatever problems exist, a hundred text messages have been exchanged among the adolescent's peer group. In *Cellular Phones, Public Fears, and a Culture of Precaution*, A. Burgess reports that many parents believe they are out of touch with the circle of friends surrounding their child and thus the variety of influences upon their social development, their thinking and behavior.⁹

To be sure, cell phone technology makes it possible for parents to communicate with their children, but a brief text message is not the same thing as dialogue. Dialogue requires a personal encounter in which people are truly present to one another. In dialogue, people really hear what others are saying and respond accordingly. Indeed the purpose of dialogue is communion and conversion, so that real understanding takes place.¹⁰

SMS technology enables young people to be free and in charge of their lives but their autonomy is constrained by their slavish dependence on their mobile phones. To quote Thurlow, Generation Txt is "young and free but tied to the mobile". (Thurlow, 2003: 1.2) If adolescents are sending 2000 text messages a month,¹¹ they are in a constant state of distraction. Thus, how can they really concentrate on anything else? What was supposed to free them has ended up enslaving them.

I believe we might compare members of Generation Txt to another group, Children of Deaf Adults (CODA) who are "born into a home where their natural ability to speak is never able to be either modelled or shared by their parents".¹² In "Youth Ministry in a World of Diversity", Paul McQuillan argued that young people socialised by western mechanistic culture are like children of deaf adults in that they have a limited capacity for religious experience, even though they are spiritual by nature -- like all human beings. Likewise, I believe that members of Generation Txt have experienced a loss of interiority because they have been so defined by technologies that crowd the mind and confound the attention. If people are unable to be quiet, they will not be able to hear their 'inner voice'.

THE FATHERLESS GENERATION



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In 1979, Henri Nouwen wrote *The Wounded Healer* in which he described the young people he encountered as: “fatherless”, “inward” and “convulsive”. The “fatherless generation” he defined as:

a generation which has parents but no fathers, a generation in which everyone who claims authority- because he is older,

more mature, more intelligent or more powerful - is suspect from the very beginning... Today, seeing that the whole adult, fatherly world stands helpless before the threat of atomic war, eroding poverty, and starvation of millions, the men and women of tomorrow see that no father has anything to tell them simply because he has lived longer. (Nouwen: 1979, pp. 30- 31)

This statement suggests that Generation Txt’s grandparents and great grandparents failed in their mission to bring about peace, justice or eliminate poverty. In the same work, Nouwen drew on the work of Jeffrey K. Hadden to describe the young people he encountered in 1979 as the “inward generation” which gave absolute priority to the personal and tended ... to withdraw into the self...”(p. 27) Nouwen believes that “it is the behavior of people who are convinced that there is nothing ‘out there’... which can pull them out of their uncertainty and confusion.” (p. 28.)

Note that this statement describes *the parents* of Generation Txt. Is it possible that many kids are lost today because their parents were lost?

Finally, Nouwen describes the “convulsive” generation as “restless and nervous people, unable to concentrate and often suffering from a growing sense of depression... [Because] what is shouldn’t be, they are saddled with frustration, *which often expresses itself in undirected violence which destroys without clear purpose, or in suicidal withdrawal from the world, both of which are signs more of protest than of the results of a new-found ideal.*”

(italics mine) (Nouwen: 1979, p. 34) He also suggests that authority figures often fail to recognize the great ambivalence underpinning this violent behaviour.

Nouwen's observation is that of a wise, empathic pastor who understands what it's like to grow up in a world without meaning and value, where major political, economic and environmental problems seem unsolvable. The generations that were supposed to change the world did not do such a good job.

I introduce Nouwen's ideas after a rather strident critique of the culture that has socially constructed our adolescents because I wanted to ask the rather obvious question: Who created this world? And now I will look at the impact of this culture of violence on family life in the 21st century.

THE WOUNDED FAMILY AND THE LOSS OF THE ELDERS

Continuing with the framework of the violence matrix, we move now to discuss the interpersonal levels of violence which include family and community breakdown. Families are embedded in a particular culture, and a violent culture will have a devastating effect on family life. In New Zealand, Maori and Pacific Islanders tend to be more embedded in the culture of violence than middle or working class Pakeha families because of the cultural and historical effects of colonization which still affect their lives.¹³ For the purpose of this paper, I will present three theories of how a family becomes wounded: 1) Ulrike Uslar-Furkert's theory of the Frazzled Family, 2) a brief discussion of Stephen Karpman's Drama Triangle, and 3) Julia Rich Harris' theory of why one child in a family fares worse than others during critical moments in adolescent development. The theories are psychological rather than structural but describe pathologies that may look familiar to those working with troubled families in many cultural groups.

The Frazzled Family and the Drama Triangle

New Zealand family counsellor, Ulrike Uslar-Furkert prefers the term "frazzled family" to the popular term 'dysfunctional family' because every family "is doing what it does in order to function/get through the day. There are no perfectly functioning families, because we are all human and constantly developing..."¹⁴ According to Uslar-Furkert, the key reason why a family becomes "frazzled" is that parents are not able to guide their children to become moral, competent adults.

We might say, therefore, that some parents are not able to be 'elders'. What is an 'elder'? According to the dictionary, an elder is: "one who is older than another or others; an

ancestor; a person advanced in life, and who, on account of his age, experience, and wisdom, is selected for office.”¹⁵ In other words, elders are responsible, self-confident adults who are capable of raising children to become moral, conscientious people.

If adolescents are not pushing against strong elders, they will collapse. In a healthy dialogue between parents and adolescents in the process of identity formation,¹⁶ parents establish boundaries that free adolescents to grow into healthy adults. Parents must embody what life is all about because they live it themselves. Teenagers must see the congruence between word and deed.

Parents are not able to be elders for a variety of reasons, such as illness, either psychological and/or physical, incompetence, ignorance, lack of confidence, drug and alcohol addictions, workaholicism or religious fundamentalism, in short, any pathology which prevents a healthy dialogue within the family in which boundaries are clear and maintained, and adolescents are supported in achieving their goals.

When the dialogue breaks down to the extent that teenagers are out of control, the frazzled family quickly becomes the wounded family where parents “parent from their pain”, to quote Uslar-Furkert, rather than from an authoritative, assertive posture. Adults with serious unresolved family issues will typically fall into this type of parenting behaviour, which only intensifies the crisis for the young.

The so-called drama triangle will emerge in which there are three actors: persecutor, victim and rescuer. According to Stephen Karpman, these roles serve as a training ground for powerlessness and prevent psychological equality in relationships.¹⁷ These roles will continue as long as someone is willing to be victimised.

For the frazzled family to heal, the person who is most aware of what is happening must step outside their role and permit the family to collapse. This will take courage, because the outcome is unclear. However if parents refuse to rescue or be victimized by an irresponsible teenager, everyone can begin to function as psychologically healthy people who take responsibility for their lives.

I believe that the dynamic described in the Frazzled Family and the drama triangle are examples of *interpersonal* violence.¹⁸ In these situations, children will be struggling with anger, frustration, resentment and failure instead of living happy, carefree lives. Moreover, they will lack the spiritual and emotional resources to process these powerful negative emotions, and thus may also become self-destructive, which leads to the *intrapersonal* dimension of the violence matrix.

Teenagers may abuse alcohol and drugs to deal with their pain. Teenagers harm themselves because they are angry with themselves, their families, and their communities. They have lost hope. And, of course, suicide is the most dramatic manifestation of this inner turmoil.

We turn now to Judith Rich Harris' theory which shifts the focus away from parental nurture *per se* to the role played by heredity and peers in human development.

The Impact of Heredity and Peers on Adolescent Development

In *The Nurture Assumption*, Harris offers a biological explanation of why some adolescents are more prone to become "at risk" than others. She writes:

Though we no longer say that some children are born bad, the facts are such, unfortunately, that a euphemism is needed. Now psychologists say that some children are born with "difficult" temperments - difficult for their parents to rear, difficult to socialize. I can list for you some of the things that make a child difficult to rear and difficult to socialize: a tendency to be active, impulsive, aggressive, and quick to anger; a tendency to get bored with routine activities and to seek excitement; a tendency to be unafraid of getting hurt; an insensitivity to the feelings of others; and, more often than not, a muscular build and an IQ a little lower than average. All these characteristics have a significant genetic component. (Harris, 1998: 295-296)

Harris believes that the family dynamic will begin to deteriorate in crisis situations when a child who is difficult to manage is born to a parent with poor management skills. It is not fair, but it is a fact of life that:

there is a statistical connection - a greater-than-chance likelihood that a person with psychological problems has a biological parent or a biological child with similar problems. Heredity is one of the reasons that parents with problems often have children with problems. It is a simple, obvious, undeniable fact; and yet, it is the most ignored fact in all of psychology. (Harris, 1998: 294)

Nature *is* unfair. Some people are born healthy and intelligent, others are not. Some children are even tempered, others are not. And when family relationships deteriorate, Harris believes that siblings with an even disposition with stable, pro-social peers will be able to weather the storm.

It would take a great deal of spiritual and emotional maturity for a person with a difficult temperament who has experienced failure and rejection as a child to accept these bad

experiences as a challenge to grow. We can embrace this journey as adults, but not as children, and certainly not as angry, frustrated adolescents. Wounded adolescents will respond to perceived injustices in their lives with anger and resentment, turn on parents and siblings as the source of their misery, and seek out others like themselves. At this point, they become “at risk” adolescents, to use the phrase of New Zealand youth worker, Lloyd Martin.¹⁹

“At risk” adolescents no longer feel connected to family or school, and thus have lost touch with the communities of meaning and value that previously informed their lives. And yet they have an intense need for belonging because it is a fundamental human need. Thus, they must find another avenue to experience success and forge an identity with ‘significant’ others who accept them. And when a new group accepts them, they will do whatever is required to fit in.

The Impact of Peers on the Troubled Adolescent

In *The Wounded Healer*, Nouwen shared an insight from the work of David Riesman to illustrate what happens to adolescents when adult authority deteriorates in their lives. He writes that “... being excommunicated by the small circle of friends to which they want to belong can be an unbearable experience. Many young people may even become enslaved by the tyranny of their peers.” (Nouwen, 1979: 32)

And yet, if we can trust the experience of Lloyd Martin, wounded teenagers *can* begin to turn their lives around even if they have bonded with antisocial peers provided they are “resilient” enough to renegotiate their identity once they feel strong enough to do so. For example, if they began to reconnect with family, pass a skills training course, get a job and maintain it, they will find the strength and confidence to distance themselves from more antisocial peers and associate with more prosocial ones.²⁰ At this point communities of healing and liberation become crucially important for both wounded families and wounded teenagers, so that both can embrace the path to wholeness.

COMMUNITIES OF HEALING FOR THE WOUNDED FAMILY

When the spiritual fabric of a community has been ripped apart by violence, there always remains a scar, but at least scar tissue implies that the wound is not gushing blood anymore. Healing requires hope and confidence that everyone involved can move forward into the light.

Healing the Wounded Parent

There is no greater anguish for parents than when beloved children have lost their way. The literature of Al-Anon holds much wisdom for helping wounded parents put their lives back together again. In books like *The Courage to Change*,²¹ parents learn that their primary responsibility is to heal themselves before they can facilitate the healing of their children. They learn how to detach and yet care, because unless they step out of the drama triangle, no one will develop the spiritual, psychological or emotional resources to take responsibility for their lives.

In *The Wounded Healer*, Nouwen offers parents a spiritual path to wholeness. He speaks of the necessity of “one who has been there before” to step into the house of one who is wounded and lead him or her to the other side. He writes:

This service requires the willingness to enter into a situation, with all the human vulnerabilities a man has to share with his fellow man. This is a painful and self-denying experience, but an experience which can indeed lead man out of his prison of confusion and fear. Indeed, the paradox of Christian leadership is that the way out is the way in, that only by entering into communion with human suffering can relief be found. (Nouwen: 1979, p. 77)

No one can understand the grief, guilt, anxiety and fear of wounded parents more than parents who have been there before but have emerged on the other side. Of course, there are family counselling agencies to support parents on the road to healing. But support groups modelled on Al-Anon would provide an invaluable service. In these groups, people who are coping with the same crisis share openly with one another in a setting of complete confidentiality. The conversation is delicate because parents are talking about their beloved children, how they have failed them, and how afraid they are for them. Only certain kinds of people should be privy to this conversation. Only another wounded parent, who has become the “wounded healer” can walk alongside them until they emerge on the other side.

This conversation is an exercise in *com*-passion -- sympathy and fellow feeling with another. Christian Family Agencies that specialise in family counselling can take the lead in providing support groups like this for wounded parents.

Healing the Wounded Adolescent: The Hero's Journey and Hauora



Image Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#)

In *The Nurture Assumption*, Harris asks a question which poses a direct challenge to practical theologians working with Christian family agencies or youth ministries: *How can we step in and break the vicious cycle of aggressive kids becoming more aggressive when in adolescence they get together with others like themselves?* (Harris: 1998, p. 353)

All the literature dealing with rehabilitating wounded teenagers stress the need for “protective factors”²² to anchor them as they begin the journey to wholeness. These “protective factors” include some way to reconnect with family, whatever therapeutic intervention is needed, as well as education and job skills programmes to enable them to function as responsible young adults in the community. Moreover, programmes like the “Break Away Adolescent Stopping Offending” course are excellent avenues for rehabilitation in which teenagers learn to avoid ‘high risk’ situations by coming to understand themselves, peer influences and family backgrounds in order to make deliberate choices and plans for their future.²³

I would like to suggest that suitable rites of initiation would also be helpful, as well as an understanding of the Maori concept of *hauora* which emphasizes balance as the key to well-being.²⁴

Aggressive adolescents Harris describe are begging for the kind of initiation ritual experienced by young Massai warriors, for example, who were expected to go out into the bush, kill a lion and bring it home. In achieving this feat, young men had an extraordinary sense of accomplishment and returned to the village in triumph. They *earned* their adult identity. Yes, there is the potential for failure, but that is part of the process. For that reason, young men prepared themselves -- physically, psychologically and spiritually, so that when the time is right, they were ready.

According to Lloyd Martin, wounded teenagers have not experienced powerful moments of transition like this from adolescent to adult society²⁵ because they missed out on the “markers” that build a strong sense of adult identity. These markers include receiving the sacrament of Confirmation, finishing high school, getting a driver’s license, a job and a car. When teenagers are attached to their families and their schools, these markers are celebrated by family and friends alike. They become the most significant rites of passage for young people today. Because wounded adolescents have not experienced these important markers, a community of healing might attempt to re-create them in some way. Rites of initiation can be created to facilitate a spiritual experience that might enable them to make the transition from adolescent to adult society.

In *The Hero with the Thousand Faces*,²⁶ mythologist Joseph Campbell believes that young men in modern society need rites of initiation as much as they did in tribal societies. This is because initiation rituals enable young men to discover their masculine power in constructive ways. I am convinced that the binge drinking, reckless driving, drug taking and other antisocial behaviors could be viewed as rites of passage that alienated, disaffected youth impose on themselves and one another, because they lack elders to guide them through critical moments in their lives.

Consider the native American vision quest. When a young man goes off to have his vision quest, he endures physical and psychological hardship so that his spirit becomes open to the powers of the cosmos. He goes off by himself into the wilderness, fasts and meditates on the meaning of life. Typically the young man will confront his demons, fears, mistakes, in short, all the negative attitudes and emotions that have entrapped him and shortcircuited his centres of spiritual energy.¹² When he has entered a state of *extremis*, the universe reveals his spirit guide to him which will guide him throughout his adult life. The goal of the vision quest is to have a profound *experience of spiritual death and rebirth*, that is, an experience of personal transformation. He then returns to the village transformed.

Of course, wounded adolescents could not possibly endure an intense psychological experience like this without the presence of elders to make sure they are safe at all times. This is because they may have already experienced the darkness of the unconscious mind if they have abused drugs. And if they lacked the spiritual and psychological maturity to navigate in the waters of the unconscious mind, they may have already damaged themselves. We must remember that in traditional societies, drugs were *only* used for religious reasons -- the vision quest -- and thus were *not* abused. Today, however, young people use drugs for recreational purposes and the religious dimension is lost.

For young women in traditional societies, the onset of menstruation is the definitive sign that the girl has become a woman. Since woman is LIFE itself, the young woman went into a hut to ponder what it meant to be mother, giver of life.

In *Circle of Stones: Woman's Journey to Herself*, Judith Duerk suggests a contemporary rite of passage for young women. For women who have never known the power of the divine feminine, she asks:

How might it have been different for you if, on your first menstrual day, your mother had given you a bouquet of flowers and taken you to lunch, and then the two of you had gone to meet your father at the jeweler, where your ears were pierced, and your father bought you your first pair of earrings, and then you went with a few of your friends and your mother's friends to get your first lip coloring, and then you went, for the first time, to the Women's Lodge, to learn the wisdom of the women? (Duerk: 1989, p. 9)

Contrast this rite of passage from the practice of many teenage girls to begin smoking at the onset of puberty!

The New Zealand bush is the perfect venue for an initiation ritual for wounded adolescents. Under the guidance of elders -- female and male -- they might begin to reconnect with their soul and experience the divine within. Discovering the world of mountains and rivers would be a life-giving experience for Generation Txt who believe that the social constructs they see on television have some relationship to the real world. Once they throw away their gadgets, they might begin to discover an inner voice leading them into the light.

Hauora: The Need for Balance in Healing the Wounded Adolescent

The lives of wounded teenagers are out of balance. Young people who have abused their bodies with cigarettes, alcohol and drugs are not healthy. They cannot breathe properly; they do not have the energy they once had; they cannot concentrate the way they once did. In short, their bodies and minds are out of balance.

Young people who have damaged their relationship with their parents to the extent that they cannot live at home are wounded. They must now fend for themselves in the world at a very young age (the legal age for leaving home in New Zealand is 16). When this happens, wounded adolescents have been cast adrift from the community that was supposed to be the most durable emotional, psychological and spiritual mooring of their lives -- their family.

Yes, parents and children can heal a relationship that has been damaged, but it takes time. The deeper the wounds, the more time it will take, and wounded adolescents simply do not have the emotional and spiritual resources to deal with the enormous grief, hurt, anger, guilt and fear they must be feeling. Therefore, in line with Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs,²⁷ it may be useful to help wounded adolescents stabilise their lives before they can confront feelings that might paralyse them. The Maori concept of *hauora* is a good place to begin.

Hauora (well-being) offers a way to see health as the balance between the physical, mental, social and spiritual aspects of human being. *Hauora (well-being)* lies at the heart of the Health and Physical Education curriculum in New Zealand. In the curriculum document, *hauora* is portrayed as a *whare* (house) with four walls, each providing an essential function. The walls are physical well-being (*taha tinana*), mental and emotional well-being (*taha hinengaro*), social-well-being (*taha whanau*) and spiritual well-being (*taha wairua*).²⁸ (Durie, 1994)

In their journey to wholeness, young people will have to embrace each wall of the house, beginning with the physical. Once physical health has been restored, they will think more clearly, feel less anxious, and maintain healthier relationships. We know that the God of reconciliation is involved in this drama of redemption, but wounded teenagers will not be able to understand this mystery until their spirit has begun to find some peace.

The Need for Mentors²⁹

I recall a painful conversation with a young man who told me that he kept behaving in the most appalling ways because no one stopped him. The statement stunned me because I knew that his parents did everything in their power to stop him -- but their efforts were completely ineffectual. The statement made me realize, however, that offending adolescents desperately want to be stopped, but simply do not have the emotional, psychological or spiritual resources to do it themselves, nor do their parents, for reasons already described in the section on the "frazzled family."

'At risk' teenagers need elders to stop them, elders who care and are in some way extensions of the family, but who are sufficiently detached to deal with them firmly yet lovingly.²⁰ Martin believes that specialist services provided for youth 'at risk':

must operate against a background of non-formal relationships with a range of adults-as-mentors, who represent the gender and cultural community of the young person. It is these relationships that help re-create a 'whole' village around a

young person... They may be focused around a service (such as employment training), but their goal is to establish a meaningful and holistic relationship with the youth involved. (Martin, 2003: 119).

Youth workers need to be recruited from the generation Nouwen describes as “fatherless”, “inward” and “convulsive”. Ideally, these youth workers have themselves survived a ‘rough patch’ because they were either lucky enough to have real elders in their lives or possessed the spiritual and emotional gifts to transcend difficult situations. This kind of person will be able to “enter the house”³¹ of wounded adolescents, hear their pain, earn their trust and help them find their way. Their method will be compassion. Nouwen writes:

Through compassion it is possible to recognise that the craving for love that men feel resides also in our own hearts, that the cruelty that the world knows all too well is also rooted in our own impulses. Through compassion we also sense our hope for forgiveness in our friends’ eyes and our hatred in their bitter mouths. When they kill, we know that we could have done it; when they give life, we know that we can do the same. For a compassionate man, nothing human is alien: no joy, nor sorrow, no way of living and no way of dying. ... A fatherless generation looks for brothers who are able to take away their fear and anxiety, who can open the doors of their narrow-mindedness and show them that forgiveness is a possibility which dawns on the horizon of humanity. (Nouwen, 1979: 41-42)

To encounter a person like this is to find someone who can look into the eyes of wounded teenagers and throw them a lifeline which could lead them to tomorrow. Someone like this can see their great potential underneath the hard, brittle disguise, and accept them as they are right now -- warts and all. When that happens, the moment of transformation can begin. This special person could introduce them to “power, love and self-discipline” from which the gifts of the Holy Spirit can flourish and grow. (2 Timothy 1.6-8, 13-14)

Some Ways Forward

The Far, Lost Generation



Image Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#)

We live in an age of violence, hopelessness and corruption, but surely there is hope. I can do no more than suggest some of the positive signs that we can build upon. Parents whose adolescent children have lost their way must become catalysts of cultural transformation. They may not have been able to be elders to their own children, but they might succeed in helping

someone else. Harris again:

... our power isn't zero. Adults do control a major source of input to their cultures: the media. Media depictions of smokers as rebels and risk-takers- of smoking as a way of saying "I don't care"- make cigarettes attractive to teens. I see no way around this problem unless the makers of movies and TV shows voluntarily decide to stop filming actors (doesn't matter whether they're the heroes or the villains) using tobacco. (Harris, 1998: 283)

Would it help to get rid of television sets and iPods and cellphones? Maybe! If there is no television in the house, parents and children will talk to one another, children will play games with one another, discover the great outdoors, and more importantly they will read. In *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television*,³² Jerry Mander makes a convincing case that the issue is not good vs. bad television, but rather how this type of technology has changed the way people process information. Television not only makes us passive consumers but also blunts creativity. The same might be said for the other prevalent technologies, but burning them all is not realistic.

If possible, members of Generation Txt might critically engage with their technology, but to do this, they must become literate and reflective. Some will be able to do this, and others will not.

Though realistic about the challenges in ministering to Generation Txt, Hugh Mackay believes that they will probably reshape society. McQuillan quotes him:

“They are a generation that beeps and hums,” one of their fathers recently remarked, and so they are. They are the generation who, having grown up in an era of unprecedented change, have intuitively understood that they are each other’s most precious resource for coping with the inherent uncertainties of life. Their desire to connect, and to stay connected, will reshape this society. They are the harbingers of a new sense of community, a new tribalism, that will change everything from our old-fashioned respect for privacy to the way we conduct our relationships and build our homes. The era of individualism is not dead yet, but the intimations of its mortality are clear.” (McQuillan, 2007: 14)

Could it be that descendents of the “fatherless generation” might come to embody a new vision of interdependence in their own ‘secular’ way-- even though the core of their spirituality may be their passionate commitment to “their mates”?

To be sure a huge generation gap may exist between Generation Txt and many practical theologians engaged with Christian family counselling agencies and youth ministries. If we wish to break the cycle of violence and self-destruction among young people, it is imperative that everyone involved in this vital conversation create an extended family for wounded teenagers and their families. Together we might move western society forward into a new era of healing and reconciliation. If Nouwen is correct, “it is exactly in common searches and shared risks that new ideas are born, that new visions reveal themselves and that new roads become visible”. (Nouwen, 1979: 100)

NOTES

1. Paul Easton, “Big rise in teen violent crime”, *Dominion Post*, 7 August 2007.
2. Emily Watt, “Young, drunk and female-the dangers are real”, *Dominion Post*, 27 September 2007.
3. David Fisher, “Our drink-driving shame”, *APN Holdings NZ Limited*, 27 May 2007.
4. AL Beutrais, D Fergusson, C Coggan, CD Collings, C Doughty, PM Ellis, S Hatcher, LJ Horwood, SN Merry, R Mulder, R Poulton, L Surgenor, “Effective Strategies for suicide prevention in New Zealand: A review of the evidence”, *New Zealand Medical Journal*, 2007, 120 (1251): 1-13.
5. Raising children is especially difficult for immigrant families without extended family for support and cut off from their cultural moorings.
6. Stuart Sellar believes that U.S. foreign policy is implicitly based on the ‘metanarrative of violence’ that salvation can be achieved through violence.
7. See SE James, J Johnson, C Raghavan, T Lemos, M Barakett, D Woolis “The Violence Matrix: A Study of Structural, Interpersonal, and Intrapersonal Violence Among a Sample of Poor Women”, *American Journal of Community Psychology*, Vol. 31, Nos. 1/2, March 2003.

8. For a comprehensive discussion, see Crispin Thurlow, "Generation Txt? The sociolinguistics of young people's text-messaging", Department of Communication, University of Washington, Box 353740, Seattle, Washington 98195, USA, 2003.
9. Reference to Burgess' book has been taken from unpublished manuscript from *Caro Mundt*, 2007.
10. See Raimon Panikkar, *The Intrareligious Dialogue* (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1978).
11. Most cellphone companies like Vodaphone market a "2000 text message a month" package to young people.
12. See Paul McQuillan, "Youth Ministry in a World of Diversity", Paper for Presentation at the *International Conference for Youth Ministry*, held at Fitzwilliam College, Cambridge, UK, January, 2007.
13. For a discussion of poverty in New Zealand, See. Lloyd Martin, *The Invisible Table: Perspectives on Youth and Youthwork in New Zealand* (Australia: Dunmore Press, 2002), chapter 3: "The Invisible Table- Poverty and how we arrive", 79-113.
14. In an email correspondence, 20 July 2007, Uslar-Furkert wrote: "Frazzled families" and "Wounded Family" are terms I have come up with, as I do not believe in dysfunctional families: the family is doing what it does in order to function/ get through the day. There are no perfectly functioning families, because we are all human and constantly developing. It is just a matter of degree of frazzledness or smoothness. "Woundedness" derives from the notion that in a case of severe frazzledness, most likely parents do their parenting from their own pain/ wounds." Ulrike Uslar-Furkert operates a counselling practice called "Living Changes". As an EFT Practitioner, Ulrike uses this very fast tool to work with the underlying unresolved emotional issues of parents, children or teenagers in such Wounded Families. This makes for much faster and more thorough and lasting outcomes of therapeutic interventions. SEE livingchanges@actrix.co.nz to contact Ulrike Uslar directly.
15. *The New Webster Encyclopedia*, 1952, 278.
16. See Erik Erikson and James Marcia on adolescent formation, "Personality and Social Development in Adolescence," *Papalia and Olds, Human Development* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1992), 342-345.
17. See Steve Karpman with Comments by Patty E. Fleener M.S.W., "The Drama Triangle", from *MH Today*, <http://www.mental-health-today.com>. See also "Karpman drama triangle" from Wikipedia, 19 September 2007. "The drama triangle is a psychological and social model of human interaction in transactional analysis ("TA") first described by Stephen Karpman, which has become widely acknowledged in psychology and psychotherapy. The model posits three habitual psychological roles (or role-plays) which people often take in a situation: victim, persecutor and rescuer. The covert purpose for each 'player' is to get their unspoken psychological wishes met in a manner they feel justified, without having to acknowledge the broader dysfunction or harm done in the situation as a whole. As such, each player is acting upon their own selfish 'needs', rather than acting in a genuinely adult, responsible or altruistic manner".
18. The literature of Adult Children of Alcoholics also describes this syndrome well. Leona King, who has studied this literature extensively, writes: "The ACOA literature applies to any family situation in which addictions and other dysfunctional behaviors (workaholism, rigid religiosity, perfectionism) prevent an open, healthy dynamic. Generally the children adapt as best they can to survive and develop serious core issues all having to do with a sense of self, such as distrust, control, avoidance of feeling, all or none functioning, dissociation, low self esteem, ignore own needs,

adrenalin junkies (drawn to high risk situations) which lead to eating disorders, intimacy problems, commitment problems, emotional and physical abuse giving or taking, etc.etc.etc...” Email correspondence with Leona King, former Nurse Manager at the Queen Elizabeth Hospital, Montréal, Quebec, 21 July 2007.

19. See Martin, *The Invisible Table*, chapter 1, “Risk and Resilience: A Model for Assessment”, 17-48.

20. See Martin, *The Invisible Table*, chapter 4, “Relationships and Community,” 115-164.

21. *Courage to Change: One Day at a Time in Al-Anon II*, 1992.

22. See Martin Frisher, Llana Crome, John Macleod, Roger Bloor, Matthew Hickman, “Predictive factors for illicit drug use among young people: a literature review”, *Home Office Online Report* 05/07. “A risk factor is ‘an individual attribute, individual characteristic, situational condition, or environmental context that increases the probability of drug use or abuse or a transition in level of involvement in drugs. (Clayton, 1992) Conversely, a protective factor is ‘an individual attribute, individual characteristic, situational condition, or environmental context that inhibits, reduces, or buffers the probability of drug use or abuse or a transition in level of involvement in drugs’ (Clayton, 1992). Resilience is a process ‘whereby young people exhibit positive behaviours although they have been exposed to risk factors’ (Werner, 1989), 3.

23. See Graeme Munford and Mike Garland, “Making choices for change”, *Social Work Now*, December 2005, 24. Of particular interest for those working with teenagers who have committed crimes is “offense chaining” in which “participants map out the events, behaviour, emotions, feelings and thinking processes leading up to an offence. “ p. 24. The more they come to understand thoughts and feelings which prompt them to behave in certain ways, the more they will be able to avoid high risk situations.

24. See Mason Durie, *Whaiora: Maori Health Development* (Auckland: Oxford University, 1994).

25. See Martin, *The Invisible Table*, “Transition to adulthood”, 45-48.

26. See Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1949/1968).

27. For a good discussion of Abraham Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, See Lloyd Martin, *The Invisible Table*, 29-31.

28. See Ministry of Education, *Health and Physical Education in the New Zealand Curriculum* (Wellington: Learning Media, 1999).

29. According to Judith McGinley, OP, *Community Worker and Teacher*, Challenge 2000 mentors minister to wounded teenagers and their families in exactly the way outlined in this section. Challenge 2000 works primarily in the Wellington region providing opportunities for disadvantaged and struggling families and individuals based on Gospel values of social justice, social responsibility and personal dignity. See: www.challenge2000.org.nz for more information about Challenge 2000.

30. Lloyd Martin writes from his own experiences in youth ministry. He is involved in an organization called Praxis, a network of Christian practioners in youth and community work which exists to help people connect with and serve their communities. See: www.praxis.org.nz for more information about Praxis.

31. See Henri Nouwen, "Personal Concern", in *The Wounded Healer* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd, 1979/1994/2005), 71-74.

32. Jerry Mander, "Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television" in *Harper Perennial*, New York, 1978.

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