

YOUNG PEOPLE SEARCHING FOR SELF

By PAUL ANDREWS

LAST CHRISTMAS BRENDAN FAILED CHEMISTRY in a school exam. This summer his mark rose to 75 per cent. His teacher called him up. 'Brendan, you are an enigma,' he said. I have never seen a boy so pleased with himself. If he had been called the most improved or industrious pupil or the most promising chemist, he would have shrugged it off as patronizing and insincere. But an enigma to adults – yes, that is where he wanted to be: beyond their manipulation, vicarious vanity, envy or affection. He did not want to have solutions imposed on him, to dance to an adult tune, to be tricked or engineered into their notion of success. He was happy to be beyond their comprehension, an enigma.

Any attempt to make sense of the teens, to understand adolescents, will be vigorously and understandably resisted by the young people themselves. It was bad enough as a teenager to have one's waking hours dominated by the work imposed by adults, dull subjects made duller by the teachers who presented them. It would add further insult for them to control one's whole existence by assigning life-tasks and life-skills which would account for what was left of one's life. Adolescents do not want to be understood, because they see that as a move towards manipulation, imposing adult solutions on one's life. If there are to be patterns and solutions, if there are to be mistakes, they want them to be their own. The self that they seek is unique and has never been found before.

A search never ended

As we observe the search for self in the teens, we need to heed a principle endorsed by St Ignatius Loyola and Sigmund Freud: that we should know our own desires. We need to ask why we are curious about the adolescent search for self. We have never trodden the paths on which adolescents search today. They live in a changed culture, both in our shrinking, endangered planet with its rapid technological transformation, and in their interior, spiritual world which is more exposed and bombarded than anything those of an older generation experienced.

For us adults, one path is both illuminating and morally safe: to explore the memory of our own teenage years. When did you find your self, and stop searching? As soon as I ask it, the question seems absurd. I am still searching, or at least I am not in a position to say that I can define my self. Some things appear more stable than they used to be. The body has stopped growing; in fact it has begun to disintegrate. There is a parable in that: as soon as we think we have achieved some stability (as in the body achieving its full growth) we find it destabilizing in unexpected directions, as in the slipping of the chest, the misplacement of its bulges, the retreat of the hair-line and the blunting of the senses.

We have not ended our search. Alas, we may have lost some of the sense of hope and discovery which marked the years of rapid growth.

Kings live in palaces, and pigs in sties,
But youth in expectation. Youth is wise.

It is an expectation both for ourselves – that we can be changed, and be almost anything – and for the world – that we can improve it beyond recognition. In the generosity of the teenage years, all things seem possible. When Jesus faced the young man who had kept the commandments from his youth and sought to be perfect, the gospel says Jesus looked on him and loved him, then tested his heart with the challenge to give away his property.

In spite of the materialism of this prosperous age, that sort of generosity might well be found more commonly than fifty years ago. This may be partly because in the western world destitution is less to be feared; young people will take more risks and be less concerned about security than we used. Their poverty of spirit is different from that of my youth. They are not the heirs of St Francis of Assisi but a new generation with more goods than they will ever need and the realization that there are other goods which money cannot buy. The search for those goods fits well under the rubric of young people searching for the self.

Erikson's forking

There is a pleasing coherence about the notion of the search for self, or for one's identity. In 1950 Erik Erikson published an influential map of development in terms of eight ages, each of them a forking of the road.¹ In adolescence the forking was between the achievement of identity and role confusion. Like all simplicities it was attractive and half true, in need of further refinement, which has been supplied over these forty years by Marcia, Waterman and others.

Take Fiona, aged fifteen. She knows she is her parents' daughter, but beyond that is in a state of confusion about who she is (Marcia's identity diffusion). Ideally she will be in no hurry to choose an identity. It has to be achieved gradually, in what Marcia called an appropriate moratorium. Some youngsters are impatient of the experimenting and uncertainties of this delay, and jump into a pre-packaged identity (called foreclosure by Marcia), the sort that is supplied by totalitarian organizations such as cults or terrorist groups.

Erikson viewed the search for identity as the task of the teen years. More recent research sees it as a concern of young adult life.² Of those in their final year at university, only one quarter could be said to have achieved an identity in the sense understood by Erikson. The surveys showed most teenagers still happily in a state of identity diffusion or foreclosure. Their attitudes might be pejoratively described as unquestioning and passive, in that they seemed to be adopting without challenge the life-style, attitudes and values of their parents. But they could just as accurately be described positively as reasonably well-behaved, with good study habits, an affectionate perception of their parents and homes, sharing their parents' ethical identity, and being basically conformist.

End of the first affair

If the search for self lasts at least a couple of decades, it is also true that it gets under way at the end of childhood. Anna Freud called puberty the slow, painful breakdown of one's first love-affair, boy with mother, girl with father. Up to that point, all one's emotional nourishment has normally come from parents. In her early teens Fiona sees the possibility of other loves outside the family, and an existence outside the home. The dawning realization is not generally welcome. It feels like a bereavement, to both parents and child. The intense search for stimulation in the early teens, the desire to feel real, whether at games, parties or loud concerts, stems in part from the need to fill the emotional vacuum at the end of childhood.

Few of us welcome periods of uncertainty, and puberty opens up multiple uncertainties. Hitherto, as long as parents stayed alive and together, they were there to tell you what to do, and to contain you in every sense. At puberty Fiona faces a raft of new tasks in which her parents can offer less and less help. She searches for herself on diverse paths: coping with her developing mind and talents, her body and its moods, relations with peers and with the other sex, vocation/career, moral and religious commitment, political stance. Identity is a differentiated rather than a unitary concept, yet she is more than the sum of all these struggles.

The fiction in the frame

When Fiona thinks of the self, her image is probably of her body. When young adolescents are asked about themselves, they commonly speak of their appearance, often in disparaging terms. By the late teens, they will respond more in terms of their personality, and the tone is more approving.

When baby Fiona first saw herself in a mirror, and an adult said: 'That is Fiona', her sense of herself was unified and changed. Up to then, she had known herself through her diffuse internal sensations of her body. Suddenly in the mirror she saw herself as a unity, with a name. Lacan speaks of the image's captivating but also alienating effect on her.³ She identified with the image rather than with her inner sensations.

What is initially an image becomes a fiction as she carries it away with her. It remains a fiction. The mirror cannot answer a teenager's most pressing question: 'Am I attractive?' A girl may see gently rounded cheeks as obese (more than 50 per cent of girls think they are overweight). Boys may see a strong nose or ears as gigantic. Every wart, every pimple, seems huge in the mirror. Fiona is preoccupied with how she looks to others, and assumes that others must be as involved as she is with her looks, that they are as admiring or critical of her as she is of herself. The reflection in the mirror offers only facts, not the evaluation – 'Am I beautiful? Am I hideous?' – that she longs for and simultaneously dreads.

Fiona's sense of her beauty is not based on the picture in the frame. Her first and most influential mirror was in the eyes of her mother. Long before she could focus on a looking-glass, she began to have a sense of her own attractiveness and preciousness from the way she was held and gazed at by her mother and father. That early reflected appraisal, by the people who mattered most in her life, established her sense of herself and her value at the deepest level.

When her body starts its transformation at puberty, its changes are so obtrusive that they inevitably become the focus of her search for self. It is a major task for a girl or boy to grow into and appropriate an adult body. The growth is no longer natural and spontaneous. Young people are bombarded both by models of how they should look, and advice on how to change their appearance and shape. So Fiona has to search for her own desires and taste through an undergrowth of half-truths and distractions from astrologers and from advertisers, telling her what she should desire, how she should spend money to achieve it, and using the buzz-word 'natural' for the sometimes questionable mixes they press on her for soap, cosmetics and diet.

The obscuring undergrowth

The undergrowth that obscures her search for self comes not only from the persuasive advertising of the commercial world. It comes also from her past. She may not want to move forward. So many reasons can hold her in childhood: babying by one or both parents; an insecurity which resists the risks of growing up; delicate health that has accustomed her to the emotional rewards of sickness and makes her loath to give up the passivity and indulgence that a delicate state can bring; unresolved feuds with one or both parents; or the scars of abuse which mar her enjoyment of her own body and existence.

She can hack her way through this undergrowth on her own, or with help from parents or other adults such as therapists. Adolescents can use therapy, but they do so reluctantly. At an age when their mind is extremely sharp, and they are eager to establish themselves as self-sufficient and competent, they are understandably loath to look for help from a stranger. Therapy with adults often involves a prolonged look at one's early memories. Adolescents find that process regressive and humiliating. They are too close to childhood to relish the experience of reliving it. Their therapy will focus on current issues and growth rather than searching for roots and explanations.

In particular, therapy will look to their sense of themselves as separate. That is painful. As Fiona weakens her ties with the parents who have been the source of her emotional nourishment, she can feel alone, empty and frightened as well as resentful of them. Growing up means taking the parents' place. In the unconscious phantasy,⁴ growing up is inherently an aggressive act. Every decision she makes about her own style and behaviour may seem an implicit judgement on her mother or father. She will usually go to a different school, take her education further than her mother did, choose a different career, affect different styles of dressing and presenting herself, and relate to the opposite sex in a different way. In each of these areas, no matter how much mother and father attempt to support her in her independence, she may well feel she is judging and supplanting them. She sees everyone over twenty-five as middle-aged. Her peers are convinced that they have cornered the market in sexuality at the expense of the previous generation.

The sense of contrariness may be quite explicit, a conscious state of counter-dependence. If mother likes Bach, I like Boyzone (or contrariwise, if mother likes Oasis I like Beethoven). I knew a boy whose parents sent him shopping for a new outfit, giving him an adequate budget for it. He jumped at the chance, spent some time choosing, and

as the clothes were being wrapped for him, asked the assistant: 'If my dad likes this, can I bring it back and change it?'

The tasks of adolescence

This article began with the image of young people as 'an enigma to adults'. To their elders young people appear to fluctuate between a dependence which hankers after the comfort of childhood and an impatient independence which sees parents as redundant. This phase can be baffling for parents who pick up projections of hostility and persecution. In these circumstances what sense does it make to speak of the 'search for self' as implying a spirituality? What does it say about young people's sense of God?

Some of the tasks of adolescence have been constant in every culture. Others are new to this generation. Adolescence as we know it dates from the time when a large population of teenage boys and girls, still living at home, found themselves earning money with few commitments and much disposable income. A huge market was created and served, with constantly changing fashions in hair, boots and magazines, and above all with music – music in a thousand distinctive styles, but always *young* music. Put together, it amounted to a separate culture which at its loudest conveyed values hostile to those of most adults.

The peer-group remains the most significant set of relationships for young people, though it may affect superficial styles, especially in the most impressionable of the young. It may remain the case that ultimately no agent has the same potential to influence young people as the parents, both parents. Nevertheless, for most young people the achieving of independence from parents is for various reasons harder than ever to complete. Thanks to better nourishment and control of disease in infancy, physical growth comes faster these days. Our children reflect the secular trend evident in all developed countries over the last century. The beginning of physical puberty is coming earlier by about four months every decade. The result is that today's teenagers find themselves physically mature, able to pass for adults when they want to, but facing an indefinite moratorium on the essential badge of adulthood, namely the independence which comes with earning their own living.

Having a job constitutes so much of a sense of personal identity that its absence often leads to aberrant developments. Some go for a pre-packaged version, in totalitarian bodies like fundamentalist cults or the Provisional IRA which offer the still unformed youngster a set of attitudes, morals and companions which save them from making any

choices other than to obey. Others seek their true selves in a premature intimacy with a lover, or content themselves with a negative identity in rejecting everything that smacks of security or establishment, a rejection that can find musical echoes in the angrier forms of Punk and Heavy Metal.

Self beyond the enigma

But such forms of premature foreclosure, such ways of avoiding the uncomfortable process of working towards a personal identity, do not mean that the *search* is ended. Success consists in what we do with our failures, and the culs-de-sac of foreclosed identity can always be retraced and survived. An ancient way of seeing that search – Socrates' notion of the true self – prescind from the heavy language of sociology and psychology. What attracts in this pre-Christian notion is precisely its *spiritual* potential, its sense of vocation.

What every young person knows is that he or she is special and unrepeatable. Beyond the enigma beckons a knowledge based on faith. Vocation, as distinct from the plateau of routine, calls us constantly forward in freedom. That sense of an exciting freedom is central to the search: not letting the mould harden too soon, retaining a feeling of endless possibilities, and of a creator who has something special in mind for me.

NOTES

¹ Erik Erikson, *Childhood and society* (Penguin Books, 1950), chapter 7: 'The eight ages of man. Stage 5: Identity confusion'.

² Peter Hill, 'Recent research in selected aspects of adolescent development', *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* 14, 1 (1993).

³ Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*, translated by Alan Sheridan (London: Tavistock, 1977), chapter 1: 'The mirror stage'.

⁴ By phantasy I mean the imaginary scene in which Fiona is a protagonist; it represents the fulfilment of a wish in a manner which is distorted to a greater or lesser extent by defensive processes.

God works his wonders through ordinary people . . .

THROUGH ALL OF OUR EXPERIENCES in life we build many relationships. Of all these relationships, the awesome, spiritual love relationship that we share with God is the most significant. While we are constantly trying to fulfil God's faith-filled and love-giving will, he, in return, is constantly making his presence known through the sometimes extraordinary occurrences in human life. These rare, monumental occurrences are often disguised through ordinary, everyday events. When a loving mother tenderly reads *Dr Seuss* and *Clifford* books to her beautiful, adorable child, how can you possibly deny the loving presence of God? And surely God's presence is felt as you experience the awe-inspiring horizon of a warm and colourful sunset, highlighted by the pink, purple, orange and yellow hues of the surrounding clouds.

Likewise, the loving existence of God is further illustrated in the everyday events of the entire community; for instance, large groups of caring, sympathetic volunteers often spend many hours of their valuable time in order to help the hungry and needy people in various food relief homes and shelters for the homeless. Without a doubt, God's loving, caring presence can be observed in many ordinary, everyday occurrences, whether it is seen in the beautiful sun reflecting off the clouds, a loving mother reading to her child, or volunteers helping others. People say that God works in mysterious ways. However, I tend to believe that God works his wonders through the ordinary events of ordinary people.

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