

Aloneness and Youth

This essay is a re-write. The other two were full of dismal statistics about families and youth in crises... but it did not convey the human side of these issues. After reading an essay on *Aeon* (online) about our human relationship with animals, the humanity essence unfolded in my mind. Humans connect with animals in an ancient way and yet in our everyday existence we disconnect with other humans. When Misha, my Aussie, would sit down with me on the trail, she and I would quietly stare into each other eyes and meet across thousands of years of evolution. We both knew that we were dedicated to each other and were secure in each other's presence. As the 19th Century song writer Stephen Foster wrote... *In the eyes abides the heart...* When she grew painfully ill toward the end there was comfort and recognition between us that I would choose the right path and free her of all that pain. Most humans relate strongly to animals, so why is it that humans ignore pain in other people? Why do we treat each other so indifferently? Why is there such a lack of community among us right now in 2024?

The incidence of loneliness has increased among us, and many youths are very alone. In a world filled with digital buzz it is very easy to believe everyone is doing fine and entertained. Nothing could be further from the truth. The digital world allows each of us to withdraw into our own cocoon, be connected, but isolated. Teens spend an inordinate amount of time online, but surveys show they are lonelier than ever. I have come to believe it is the lack of face-to-face interactions with others that is the source of this loneliness.

There is a walking path along Lake Washington that I walk frequently. When I walk this path in the morning there are only a few walkers, mostly older folks. The men almost always smile and nod to each other and say "morning". And sometimes women will interact too. When this happens the eyes meet each other, this ancient rite of looking into each other's face where humans have been meeting for thousands of years. The same place all animals meet each other, in the eyes.

However, young walkers almost never look in your eyes, and if they do it is unusual. The young are often engaged in a conversation with their earbuds, they are crank necked looking into their cell phone, or they stare straight ahead determined not to recognize the person coming toward them on a sparsely occupied path. I have experienced this same phenomenon hiking on isolated mountain trails... passing by young people without them exchanging recognition. This is disconcerting.

In the 21st Century it is becoming increasingly difficult for young people to pass through their growth years to safely reach maturity without becoming entangled and injured by intense emotional issues related to drugs, suicide, gun violence, social media pressure, family dissolution, hunger, and homelessness. We are a country whose youth are in deep crises.

Today's young are swimming in a toxic brew of social media influences. Teens are constantly urged to adopt someone else's shallow idea of who they should be. TV and online advertising constantly demand we buy their products to become desirable people. Social media pressures the young with images of other exciting lifestyles, urging them to be popular and join the crowd. The strongest urge young people have is for acceptance, and withholding acceptance is also the most powerful tool social manipulators can use to punish resistant behavior and generate guilt.

Looking into the eyes, smiling, and giving recognition will not solve these problems for youth, but it will send a strong signal to the heart that there is another path forward for that teen and give them hope. John Prine wrote a song called *Hello In There* about connecting with lonely people.

*So if you're walkin' down the street sometime
And spot some hollow, ancient eyes
Please don't just pass 'em by and stare
As if you didn't care
Say, "Hello in there, hello"*

This song is doubly true for young folks who are struggling to understand a new world they have little experience in dealing with; who don't have the thick skin of older people. We all need to meet those eyes, smile, and say hello, can I help you? One way to connect is for adults skilled in discussing the issues to be pro-active and meet young people in small group sessions and talk about what they are experiencing, eye to eye. Breaking down the walls of isolation is very important. Finding common ground with others can be emotionally supportive and educational to those teens who are oblivious to the pain in their fellow students. Establishing that ancient human facial contact can lighten the heart.

When they are troubled, lonely youth need to hear the message from R.E.M. in *Everybody Hurts...*

*If you're on your own in this life
The days and nights are long
When you think you've had too much
Of this life to hang on...
Well everybody hurts sometimes*

Hold On, Hold On

It is a song about others around you offering support. Come on adults, look into those young eyes, smile, and say “hello in there, just hang on, talk to me, tell me what is troubling you”.

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