A Rift in Identity
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A political victory, a rise of rents, the recovery of a sick friend, or some other external event raises your spirits and you think good days are preparing for you. Do not believe it. It can never be so. Nothing can bring you peace but yourself. Nothing can bring you peace but the triumph of principle.
  Ralph Waldo Emerson

They reach their hand out, but who will be there? In the modern era, prior to the turbulent 60s, a teen could plan on the assistance of an adult. Today, that is not the case. It might be an adult, but chances are it will be a peer or no one at all. Adolescents today are not guaranteed the support or guidance they could count on back in the "good old days." Because of that, they also cannot rely on being able to experiment with a safety net in which to fall. They have been forced to the edge of a precipice, no longer being thought of as immature and needing time to deal with experiences, but sophisticated and able to handle things on their own. They are given no protected place in society and therefore have had to develop their own realities as they balance precariously between adolescence and adulthood.

In the glorious 1950s, teenagers could bask in the predictable security illustrated through the literature of the time (e.g. Hardy Boys, Nancy Drew) and the characters (e.g. Andy Hardy, Velvet Brown) made popular by the relatively new media of film. If the adolescents depicted in these fictional tales had a problem, there was always an adult to rescue them, guide them back and explain/reason the error of their youthful decisions. The fictional portrayals emulated their own realities. Teens lived in homes with a father who worked, a sibling or two, and a mom who stayed home to care for them, or a nuclear family. They could observe acceptable behavior at their leisure and advice was within reach. The transition from the modern era (late 19th century to the middle of the 20th century) to the postmodern era brought many changes. Instead of a nuclear

family, adolescents were introduced to a permeable family, one that consisted of many variant forms: two working parents, a single parent, an adoptive parent, a remarried parent, step siblings, etc. The change in the family structure also brought about a change in family experiences. If a parent was remarried, they previously participated in the rituals of courting within their children's scrutiny. If a parent was divorced, they went through the breakup of a marriage privy to the curious eyes of their children. Parents were no longer unquestionable role models, they were fallible, and they were not always accessible. With the downfall of parental perfection came another adjustment; the view of teenage worldliness changed as did the portrayal of teens in the media from having problems and seeking adult advice to being independently capable of solving problems illustrated even through cartoons (e.g. Scooby Doo) and nontraditional scenarios in film (e.g. Buffy, the Vampire Slayer).

Adolescents were thrust into this new unstable role through a progression started in the 1960s. Equality was sought through the civil rights and women's liberation movements. This new democratic culture extended itself to the rights of children who were seen prior to the 60s as infantile and whose knowledge and abilities were underestimated (Elkin, 1998). After this point, not only were women and minorities given new rights, but adolescence was viewed as a period of social sophistication. As a result and partially because of a changed economy, parents have given teens 12 fewer hours per week of one on one time over the last twenty years (Elkin, 1998). The media and merchandisers have cashed in on this void by marketing depictions of sexuality, violence, brutality, drug use, etc. Rather than fret over something they have no time to shield their teenagers from, parents have changed their perception of their teens from needing security to one of maturity and competence, no longer needing protection from threatening content. This decrease in adult protection for teens has further transferred to the trend of assigning adult

sentences for juveniles committing serious crimes, giving decision making authority to 14-year-olds regarding abortion, and the new work ethic of millions of teenagers who choose to make their temporary vocations a priority over school responsibilities (Hymowitz, 2003).

Teenagers not only are losing out on a sense of security, or a bridge over troubled terrain from adults, but they are also lacking a basic support in their own bridge. Elkind (1998) makes a connection between adolescents' fundamental needs in becoming a mature adult. He sees them as needing a strong sense of personal identity which can only be formed by combining differentiation and integration concepts. Differentiation involves the process of "discriminating or separating out concepts, feelings and emotions," (Elkind, 1998, p. 18) while integration includes "putting separated parts together into a higher-ordered whole" (Elkind, 1998, p. 18). If there are interruptions to this identity construction process, a "patchwork" self can result with key components missing. These missing supports can "create role confusion … an uncertainty about one's place in society and the world" (Boeree, 2006). Difficulties in developing a self concept as a teen result from how stressors are differentiated and integrated without the support or guidance of an adult. Not only are teens faced with a larger number of stressors than their parents, but they also face them at a younger age and the stressors have evolved from those of the modern era.

Adolescents from the modern era had decisions to make concerning freedom, but those choices did not revolve around the same content as what the postmodern youth must consider. Now teens can "choose whether or not to become sexually active, to abuse drugs, or to look at pornography – freedoms largely unheard of in earlier generations" (Elkind, 1998, p. 216). How they handle these freedoms is determined by how solidly their identity is formed. Some teens are anxious and will respond to these choices with symptoms of psychosomatic illnesses and

eating disorders, while other teens, labeled as conforming, will respond through substance abuse, particularly the abuse of alcohol (Elkind, 1998).

Adolescents today experience a second stressor, loss, in ways that were foreign to preceding generations. The divorce rate in society has escalated from 8.4% in 1958 (National Center for Health Statistics, 1973) to between 40 and 50% currently (Hurley, 2005). Obviously, teens have a higher probability of living in a permeable family and facing the realities contained therein. A child who might have been revered as the eldest one day, might be faced with a new family of stepsiblings and end up falling somewhere in the middle, thus losing his respected position among his biological siblings (Elkind, 1998). What sense of self this adolescent had developed would no longer apply and a new sense of self would need to be determined. This loss of position, or any loss, would be handled by teens in the same way adults handle loss, through a period of depression. Postmodern teens suffer more loss than their predecessors and, as a result, suffer more depression. The reactions can run from a healthy, natural depression acceptable as a response to any deficiency, to reversing roles with a parent, or even to suicide. Morbidity rates in response to stress have increased in the postmodern era as have the resulting suicide rates (Elkind, 1998).

The final typical stressor faced by teenagers is failure. One way failure has increased for teens in the postmodern era has been as a result of combining once small schools into larger educational factories. These large schools are impersonal, overemphasizing anonymity over a sense of self. Angry adolescents respond to this setup for failure with anger at authority and rules in general, while frightened teens may respond by avoiding the situation through psychosomatic disorders or literally running away (Elkind, 1998). Adolescents who respond by

running away severely limit their chances of ever developing a complete identity as they will only be facing mounting stressors during the experience.

Living in the postmodern era does not have to be the abysmal life it seems for teens. Individuals cannot alter society, but parents and teachers can look for ways to help adolescents stay safe and develop despite the chasms they face. Parents will be of the most benefit if they try to see the world from their adolescent's view, comport themselves as adults, recognize teen needs to be socialized, and set rules and limitations. By doing all of these, teens can once again feel secure in a net based on love and caring. Schools and educators need to recognize that just because they cannot do everything, it does not mean they cannot do anything (Elkind, 1998). In both cases, schools and parents will succeed in helping teens develop their identities most when they base their rules and decisions on principles rather than on preferences.

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