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Gen Y's free and easy life

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Why do young people today give a wide berth to life-time commitments?

Getting a group of youngsters to commit to an activity is a real challenge. Anyone who runs an educational establishment for teens can attest to this. In the youth club that I run in a suburb of Dublin our aim has always been to help participants stick to a project until its objectives were achieved. For some members this required the performance and recording of a well-known rock song, for others the manufacture of a chopper bicycle, for others designing a website. I must admit that many projects that were started with great enthusiasm were never completed.

Little staying power and lack of commitment to a cause is symptomatic of a generation that relies on instant gratification as the basis for decision-making. But is this a perennial feature of the teenage years or is it part of a broader generational shift? Is there evidence that recent generations of youngsters are finding it harder to make and keep commitments?

The answer seems to be Yes. The decline in marriages and the rising age of those who do marry (1), as well as the decline in life-long religious vocations, point to an aversion to the long haul. There is also less involvement by young people in politics as evidenced by the drop in membership to youth sections of political parties (3) and lower electoral turnouts (4). What's going on?

First, we need to clarify what lack of commitment means. The most obvious implication is a deficit in staying power. More importantly, it means a reluctance to give oneself to another: whether to a person, a cause, an ideal, a job or a calling. Commitment means surrendering one's freedom for the sake of another; restricting choices to please someone else, and to act for some motive other than one's own gratification.

By way of illustration, the word "commitment" in Spanish is "entrega": a giving or an offering – coming from the verb "entregar", to give or deliver. It has clearer

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connotations of giving-of-oneself than the English term. Remember the old joke about the pig and the hen contributing to the farmer's breakfast? The hen was contributing with a donation; the pig makes a total commitment. Commitment is for keeps.

My feeling is that today's youngsters are finding it harder to make lifelong decisions than past generations. It also seems harder for them to stick to choices made until the desired results are reached.

Let's look at the second conclusion first. Most adolescents live in the present. Their choices are about the here and now, or at most about the next couple of days. This attitude leads to a carefree way of making decisions. At home the tendency is to aim to get one's own way most of the time, rather than to foster unity and long-term relationships with parents and siblings. In school it manifests itself by trying to get by with quick fixes: cramming before exams, lifting material from cyberspace for essays and projects with little analysis or assimilation, etc.

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Technology and the media overexposure compound this problem. Teens live in a world of entertainment where the objective is to satisfy all immediate urges and temporarily reduce boredom. Traditional hobbies and playing sports are in decline: easy access to fast entertainment (music-to-wear, computer-games, TV and DVDs) is making it harder for modern-day teens to engage in activities that require effort and stamina.

Relationships are often created in superficial virtual worlds. Internet chatting and social websites – where the need for commitment and bonding is virtually nil – fill the idle hours of millions of adolescents in the Western world. Relationships are becoming as disposable as clothes and toiletries. The mobile phone is the perfect working tool for a teenager: plans can be made or changed in minutes without major implications. If a boy is late for a date because he missed the train because he wouldn't get off the computer game, he just rings her and lets her know: no big deal!

Let's turn now to the first conclusion. How about lifelong commitments? A recent study of Australian "Generation Y" youths (born between 1976 and 1990) revealed that their level of social concern is not high (4). They tend to be more self-centered and lacking in altruism than previous generations. They are more likely to agree that "morals are relative", and less likely to claim that faith is important in shaping their lives. Less than 20 per cent participate actively in a church.

What factors can we identify as having an effect on this lack of commitment in young people? Adults must surely take some of the blame. Teenagers need to learn that a life of commitment and selfless dedication brings fulfillment and genuine happiness. But when they look for role models, young people often see little evidence of long-lasting commitments and loyalties. In their homes many experience the damning effects of marital breakdown and divorce. In the business world they hear about a job merry-go-round which smacks of institutional disloyalty and lack of staying power. The beautiful people in show biz and sports swap and change partners as if they were designer clothes.

But the deeper reason why young people hesitate to make long-term commitments is their ignorance of what true freedom is. Most define it as choice

without obstacles or constraints; the ability to make decisions on the spur of the moment; living without reference to fixed principles; the possibility of ignoring the long-term consequences of choices.

Young people today are more individualistic and self-centred. As the Australian survey found, "the social forces influencing contemporary spirituality – secularisation, the relativism of post-modernity, consumer capitalism, individualism – have a greater impact." Such self-centredness makes a life of commitment almost impossible.

True freedom implies commitment to a roadmap. A mature person does not simply make choices; he makes the right choices. They take him towards his life goals or ambitions. But without a map of goals it is difficult to judge what the right choice is. Decisions such as choosing the friends one hangs around with, or deciding to stay away from drugs and unhealthy addictions, or dedicating an extra hour to an important exam rather than playing at the computer, may have serious implications for the kind of life we will ultimately live.

What is "the right choice"? This emerges only when you know the difference between right and wrong. Unhappily very few people, particularly among the young, have clear ideas about this difference. Harvard University law professor Mary Ann Glendon, in a paper for the Eighth International Youth Forum (5), argued that the present generation of students "has little concept of objective morality or truth: they are equipped with few guidelines for judging right and wrong."

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Finally, the absence –or remoteness– of God is an important reason why many young people tend to make decisions in a vacuum and disregard long-term consequences. A teenager is more likely to avoid sexual encounters until marriage if he or she is brought up in a deeply religious home where God is seen as a loving Father with a plan for everyone's happiness here and hereafter. Teenagers for whom God does not come into the picture, and for whom the meaning of man's existence is a total mystery, are likely to ignore the consequences of their actions because they see them as devoid of significance.

Parents and teachers have a serious responsibility to form the character and the consciences of young people so that they can make wise decisions based on sound principles, taking into account the long term consequences for their lives. They must set a good example and become good role models. In the past parental values and social mores complemented each other and were mutually supportive. This is no longer true, so parents have to work much harder.

Conscious goal-setting in key areas of teenagers' lives (family, school, friends, dating, hobbies, addictions, faith and so on) also needs to be part of a young person's formal education. It is a shame that schools stress academic and ignore character development. How much easier it would be for young people to develop a sense of commitment and to make the right decisions if their schools taught them how they should live as well as what they should know. As folk singer Joan Baez used to say, "You don't get to choose how you're going to die, or when. You can only decide how you're going to live."

Notes

(1) See for instance a report from the Office of National Statistics published in the London Telegraph on 19/12/06. In the early 1970s, 85% of women were married before they turned 30, in comparison to fewer than 33% in 1996-2004.

(2) cf. Ballington, J., “Youth and political participation: Tuned in or tuned out?”, International IDEA, Oct 2001

(3) Gybson, C., “From inspiration to participation – A review of perspectives on youth civic engagement”, Carnegie Corp., Nov 2001

(4) “The Spirit of Generation Y: Young People, Spirituality and Society” by Fr Michael Mason, ACU, 2006

(5) Glendon, M.A., “Generation Y bears unusual burdens”, Pontifical Council for the Laity, Rome 2004.