

2007

Adolescent

In Defence
of Teenage
Girls

Poor adolescents they really ~~do~~ get some bad press don't they? Hormonally out of control, lackadaisical, awkward, disrespectful, narcissistic and impossible to live with.

I've had lots to do with adolescents on and off for years and having just returned to some casual ~~secondary school~~ teaching have the benefit of ~~some~~ renewed close up scrutiny and interaction with this maligned demographic.

I love them. I mean I find them really difficult too but I love them all the same because it's hard trying to live up to a negative stereotype and a lot of them aren't ~~so good~~ ^{doing so well} at it. Adolescents ~~often~~ struggle with lots of things on a daily basis including trying to be naughty ~~in an attempt to confirm adults' preconceptions of them.~~ ^{And if they are not being naughty they are wanting so hard to be interesting and attractive that it's cause for a considerable amount of daily pressure ~~for~~ them.}

Common wisdom is telling us that the adolescent is 'worse' behaved than ever these days and that in my day - the 70's - or your day, we just weren't as bad, unruly or hopeless. But we probably were pretty bad you know. Not all of us and not all in the same way but it couldn't have been ~~so~~ ^{that} easy on our parents ~~and~~ ^{or} teachers in the old days either.

I used to run away from home fairly often. I'd come back after a few hours or a day and a night once but would invariably return, storm into my room, shout something ^{appalling} at my mother, refuse to eat at the table and remain silent for the next 24 hours. Poor mum. Once after I had plucked my eyebrows ~~fissure~~ thin for the first time, colored my hair and hand-hemmed my school uniform so that it barely covered my knickers, my mother ~~threatened~~ ^{warned} to never have me back and that I should go and live ~~with~~ ^{with} my father.

Some of my friends were so mean to teachers that they would make them cry. Others smoked and approximated sex down behind the library building. Some of us had boyfriends and some of us didn't but most of us were interested in who was 'going' with who and who had 'dropped' who lately. I got dropped once because I spent my lunchtimes doing drama rehearsals and so had little time to walk the school yard arms locked in advertisement with my boyfriend.

A sign of things to come looking back - that ~~remaining~~ unresolved tension between career and personal life.

Another time they threatened to expel me from school because this bunch of tough girls had beaten me up in the toilets, taken my lunch and I had become unwittingly embroiled in ^{adolescent} gang warfare. In retrospect my mum's prompt and hands-on ^{really} dealing with the issue was impressive but at the time I was embarrassed by her storming up to the school and calling the Deputy Head a delinquent. This was definitely not cool. Although we didn't say cool back then but they do now and they say 'awesome' a lot too and "rad".

Adolescent-speak has always, at its best, been punctuated with a grammatically non-sensical and colorfully suggestive use of the language. It has become increasingly colonized by North American popular culture of course, which is itself a melange of borrowed and misappropriated syntax and vocabulary and I am sure that adolescents speak faster than they used to. I don't want to be a grumpy old you know what but some kids are really hard to understand. I spend lots of time in my Drama and English classes getting students to teach me their language so, ~~as~~ they will be ^{so receptive} more amenable to my teaching them the curriculum's and mine. ~~It's~~ weird the way they communicate ~~the~~ the myriad language liberties and surprising substitutions they ^{ll} employ.

"Miss I reckon that Kylie's whole coming back is rad 'cause of her cancer making it real cool, just giving it to them and ~~that she's still awesome and can still be sick.~~ ^{she's still awesome} Not sick in that way Miss, I mean sick as in hot, as in she rocks".

Did a few days at a Girls' Catholic school last week and my first class was Religion. Instructions left by the absent teacher included, "Can you please remind the girls that they will need five different images of Mary in hard copy for Tuesday's lesson". I did remind them but not before asking them to tell me about Mary. "She was awesome Miss", and I suppose she ~~really~~ was awesome. really...

Watching this group of 15 year old girls with their braces - so many kids have braces these days! - their little attempts to render the prescribed uniform unique, a mad desire to please ^{combined with} and an uncontrollable need to contest, I was taken with their newness. I was so touched by their

remaining innocence that it made me want to hug them all and show them photos of my son. I refrained from the first impulse but did show them some photos - "He's so cool Miss, is your husband a spunk too?" What to say, this is a catholic institution after all? "I don't have a husband anymore, I'm divorced". "That's so sad Miss, what a loser you're better off without him. At least you got this little dude out of it anyway eh."

^{hey} So I asked them if they could tell me one of the eight key elements of discipleship? The girl who responded read it straight out of her text book and I couldn't help wondering how much of this stuff was actually sinking in: "A Christian does not always understand things that happen. They must reflect, pray and sometimes accept that they do not understand for the time being".

I was tempted to add that you never really ever understand anything but I thought it a bit provocative and anyway the bell went and all the girls rushed the door. "See ya Miss thanks".

On this program recently it was suggested that one of the reasons girl adolescents touch each other a lot might ~~have~~ ^{have} something to do with their need for affection now that touching their parents is not cool. Or that being physical with other girls may be a kind of ~~practice~~ ^{release} for being intimate with boys. Maybe, but being with a boy is so different and so fraught with other stuff it's hard to imagine that one kind of tactile expression approximates the other. ^{Then there's those Power Girl}
~~girl-to-girl~~ ^{girl-to-girl} school crushes of course!
In a co-ed environment girls and boys are often trying to find ways to be in physical contact. Sometimes the ruses employed are so strategic as to be hilarious. Other times it's simply holding hands or that particular way adolescents lean and loll over one another, awkward, territorial and self-conscious they link and lean, stroke and sidle in an attempt to reassure the friendship or re-claim intimacy.

As I watch them dragging themselves through school corridors, clambering and conspiring at their lockers, often sneering and scoffing at anything outside the square or singing to themselves - no one listens to the radio anymore by the way they just download hits apparently - I am reminded of what a strange period of life it is being an

adolescent. They can be tough going, impenetrable, but they are also capable of remarkable kindness and a relationship to the world that is barely fathomable to ~~the~~^{us} grown ups, who's brains ~~is~~^{are} already fully developed apparently.

Youth is not wasted on the young it's just that we want them to be more like we are and that's just silly. They get over it eventually and I guess some will carry little hurts and miseries, victories and loves well into their adult lives.

They come back