
STRATEGY FOR SANITY

Earl Palmer

When most of us reminisce about our youth, there are two or three years of that mental journey that we only dimly remember—if we remember them at all. Those years correspond roughly with the seventh-, eighth-, and ninth-grade years. The years of early adolescence. I've often wondered why there's this void in many memories.

Perhaps one reason for this forgetfulness is that these two years for most of us weren't as happy as our other growing-up years. But why? Two reasons—the powerful, almost unmanageable experience of growing during the early teens; and the disconnectedness that we feel, and sometimes want, and always fear during these early-teen years.

Growing is by nature stressful, but never as much as during the junior-high years. For one thing, everyone grows at a different rate and with somewhat different side effects. Girls, for example, are out of sync with their male classmates; and for much of the time in junior high, they're physically beyond most of the boys. Their social interests, too, have veered sharply from the interests of boys their age. Males, on the other hand, begin junior high peacefully as little boys—but they experience the swiftest changes of their lives in these two or three years (especially during summers, it seems) as their bodies become muscular and taller and their faces more angular. But this man-becoming is also a time when voices crack and feet stumble.

Neither Here Nor There

The intensity of growing creates a time between times, a disconnected-

ness. The body a junior higher is getting used to is disconnected from the earlier childhood body, yet neither has this new body settled in as a young adult's body that's finally his or her own. So we shouldn't be surprised that during this two- or three-year period many kids develop feelings about their images that are unrealistically hard on themselves. For some, this becomes the starting place for self-image problems that will continue to intimidate them far beyond their junior-high years, sometimes deeply into their adulthood. So can a physical awkwardness, for instance, spawn a social disconnectedness that plays itself out in withdrawal from socially demanding situations. And, especially for boys, there's often a withdrawal during these years from physically demanding sports—which explains how poorly taught junior-high PE classes can be so damaging to boys' self-confidence. The disconnectedness hurts teenagers, true—but it's acquired as a protective maneuver.

Nevertheless, this time between times is an immensely formative period—academic habits are established that set up later career choices; decisions about alcohol, drugs, and sex are made; patterns of relating with others are formed. What baffles me is that adults seem so unaware of these years' significance. As pivotal a time as it is, why is it that so few adults who know and love kids work through these years with them creatively and sympathetically?

By suggesting that we can help them in their disconnectedness, I am not advocating tighter discipline at home—for this is when teenagers need to be granted increasing freedom from parental supervision. So aside from the invalid connectedness of control, how can the connecting process be enriched?

Let's Get Real

First, everyone involved with teenagers needs to be realistic about what's happening. Of all times, this is the time to talk frankly about the normal experiences of growing up. We need to talk realistically and accurately about questions teenagers have about sexuality and the stresses of interpersonal relationships between boys and girls. Parents and their kids need to communicate about the values that mean the most to them and about how those values relate to cars and clothes, happiness and health, falling in love and booze.

Discussions like this may be planned, but they happen more often en route—just because a teenager and a parent both feel safe with each other to talk and listen. This connecting may be due to the help a church gives families in helping them think through their kids' development. Whenever and however such communication occurs, the good result is that relationships are enriched and strengthened—a teenager's loneliness is broken into by relationship.

Secondly, it's vital for parents to reach out creatively and supportively toward the friends of their early adolescents. Volunteering to cart around kids for school, scouts, and church goes a long way in demonstrating a desire to be a friend with a teenager's friends. Reduced to a rule, I suppose the total-availability rule is best—to be present and helpful whenever needed. Since these are the pre-driver's-license years, the opportunities for this kind of availability are plentiful; and the bonus parents get is a supportive relationship with their kids' friends. Since peer groups are so critical to the junior higher, parents need to find ways of

becoming friends with the kids who constitute the inner circle.

Not a lot of parents actually do this. Those who do, those who are warmly and practically supportive, provide a positive reference point for kids. Such parents become anchors in an otherwise heaving, peer-dominated ocean. I'm talking not about snoopiness, but about the kind of parental openness that encourages the transparency teenagers yearn for in adults—the kind that makes kids feel good about bringing their friends over for dinner. Then parents are connected not only with their teenagers, but with the peer network so important to adolescent life.

A third strategy has to do with atmosphere. Adults have it in their power to reduce some of the pressures weighing down many junior highers. A seventh grader has no business letting worry about acceptance into an Ivy League school eat up the seventh-grade year—so adults need to signal that we aren't worried, either. Neither should a teenager feel guilty for being stormy in a stormy time of life. A bit of teenage shouting in a family is not grave insolence and shouldn't be interpreted as if the full-fledged adults did the shouting. The adults in a young person's life need to wait it out with humor and love without giving up during the times kids experiment with freedom. And when they fail, we need to believe in God's forgiveness for ourselves and for our youngsters.

Fourthly, this is a time of passage. We who create culture need to create rites of passage for our kids in this marvelous time of their lives—and of our lives. In the celebration of a confirmation class, youth can confess their faith publicly. Families should cheer for the change of voice in a boy. It's a time for the warm and understanding celebra-

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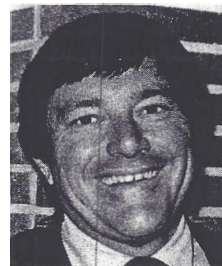
tion of a daughter's menarche and of the first whiskers on a son. These are times for rejoicing, and a family can find ways to celebrate the marvel of passage in a way that shows not only how normal everything is, but also how exquisitely God has made us. In this way we move beyond embarrassment about ourselves toward an enthusiastic connectedness with ourselves and with the grand design of God's creation.

The Serendipity of Frozen Yogurt

Plain old fun is one of the best connectors there is—and there's probably more need for fun in families and church groups at this time of a person's life than at any other time. Surprise stops for frozen yogurt, movies seen together, an evening at a pro ball game, those special times between fathers and daughters, sons and mothers, sons and dads, mothers and daughters—that older sibling who makes a junior higher feel like a million bucks by taking him to college for a visit. These encounters all build self-confidence because they make kids feel good about themselves and what they're becoming.

Finally, these are times when teenagers can really make a good friend of the Lord Jesus Christ, who really loves teenagers and always has. The junior high years are very special years in the faith journey of a human being because

the junior higher's mind is at a peak of alertness and is therefore able to think clearly about the fullness and intricacy of Christianity. Early adolescence can be a moment of decision making in one's life journey, and so is a time for thoughtful and content-oriented presentations of the claims and promises of Jesus Christ. It's not a time to depreciate or underrate the minds of those young persons in our youth groups or in our homes who are growing so fast before our eyes, but rather the season for respect and thoughtful engagement—for this is a time when the teenagers in our homes are as bright and quick as they'll ever be. We won't regret any of the hours spent in encouraging this key generation of people at a time between times. ♦



Earl Palmer is pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Berkeley, California.