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The Kids are Alright

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The kids are alright
When it comes to our young people, we're worrying about all the wrong things

ANNE T. GALLAGHER

At sixteen, almost half of my classmates from the year before had already left school and were either working or on the dole. Whether at school or not, pretty much everyone I knew smoked, took drugs, drank as often as possible and was either having extremely unsafe sex or pretending to. This culture was so strong that I can remember the single person I knew who didn’t smoke; the small handful who everyone knew had never been drunk. The gender divide was real and nasty. Boys were mostly horrible to all girls except the ones they wanted to sleep with. Girls took it on the chin and pretended not to care. Anyone who was a little bit different was in constant danger of social isolation. Almost nobody I knew exercised voluntarily - ever; we baked our bodies in the sun; listened to music with hateful lyrics; and, when not starving with the help of purloined diet pills, lived on pies, fried potato scallops and chocolate milk.

These memories make me wary of the ritual demonisation of our current crop of youth, who, if our mainstream media outlets are to be believed, are fatter, lazier, more drunk, depressed, promiscuous and dissolute than any previous generation. From my precocious vantage point (chastened mother of sixteen year old twins), it seems to me that we’ve got it all wrong and that the kids today really are quite alright. They don’t smoke; they take drugs in lesser quantities than we did and with the benefit of much more information. They drink and get drunk but this doesn’t seem to be essential to a good time in the way it was back then. Boys appear to be capable of liking girls for more than the possibility of scoring and girls seem to be able to sustain real friendships with the opposite sex in a way that was unthinkable when I was their age. They are largely indifferent to the race and sexual orientation of others. To go for a run, reject junk food for a day or a week; stand up to a bully; none of this is weird.

At first I thought my experience was an anomaly of time and place. But a growing body of research is challenging the media-driven panic about the state of our young people. Across the developed world, kids are more careful, more socially conservative, more caring, than their parents. Those cherished indicators of decadence: teenage pregnancies, STIs and crime rates, are at an all-time low. Drug and alcohol use is falling faster among young people than any other age group. In Australia, the largest increase in illicit drug use has occurred amongst the over 50s, and it’s the over 70s who are drinking harder than anyone else.

But on other measures it seems that things haven’t improved quite so much. While today’s youth is certainly better behaved and probably nicer than we were, they also seem much more tame. They’re alright, not inspired to challenge and confront; not inflamed with curiosity or passion, desire or ambition.

And our young people are as uncritical in their views and as evangelical in their outlook as any kid of the ’70s or ’80s, and maybe even more so. The curious uniformity of their positions on the big issues of the day seems to be something new – or perhaps it’s just a sharper expression of what has always been there. Certainly the threat of social opprobrium for challenging established truths is much more real, and far scarier, than it’s ever been.

As my daughter explained, it would be impossible for anyone she knows to express the views I espouse at the dinner table on the same-sex marriage debate (fine but boring, a bit pedantic, we should be focusing all that energy on the outrageous persecution of homosexuals in Uganda and Russia) without being labelled a fellow traveller of homophobes. It would be impossible to argue my corner on the subject of free speech (immediately repeal 18C and apologise to anyone who has fallen foul of this illiberal law) without being accused of pandering to bigots. It would be impossible to inject my brand of nuance into the party line on migration and asylum (stop the boats, increase orderly humanitarian intake to a level that enables us to regain a modicum of national self-respect) without being suspected of racism, or at least selfish ill will. Of course, I already knew that that this was the case in grown-up Australia. But it’s a bit dispiriting to discover that the nation’s critical faculties are being shut down so early and so completely.

And before Speccie readers stand up and take a ‘told-you-so’ bow: be warned, this schoolyard evidence of an epic, collective failure in learning how to think implicates and shames us all. Across the political spectrum we are impoverished and trapped by rigid orthodoxies that silence dissent from within the ranks. Our public spaces have become self-regarding echo chambers. In these narrow, chilly corridors of thought, nuance is despised and the middle ground lies fallow - a friendless desert that few dare traverse.

In the immortal words of Philip Larkin, the twentieth century’s most lyrical misanthrope:

They fuck you up, your mum and dad
They may not mean to, but they do
They fill you with the faults they had
And add some new ones, just for you

Our kids have learned from the best and we reap as we sow.

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