The First Year Out

UNDERSTANDING AMERICAN TEENS AFTER HIGH SCHOOL

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The University of Chicago Press
Chicago and London

INTRODUCTION

An Unexpected Journey

My first year out, that is, the first year that followed my own high school graduation, was a time of significant personal change. As a high school student, I had glimpsed a larger world through a voracious appetite for reading and through the liberal and cosmopolitan perspectives of my primarily Jewish, public school teachers. But growing up the youngest of five brothers in a blue-collar, urban, and Christian fundamentalist home kept that larger world at a distance. So I had, truly, an intellectually liberating and socially broadening experience during my freshman year at evangelical Wheaton College in Wheaton, Illinois. That was because evangelicals, especially of the sort found at Wheaton, took intellectual life seriously. They were not suspicious of new ideas or new theories, like the handful of Bob Jones University graduates who attended my otherwise blue-collar home church. Rather, they considered all ideas carefully and sought to learn all they could from them, no matter their source. "All truth is God's truth," they loved to say, "wherever it be found." At the same time, my first year out was socially broadening, because this blue-collar Philly boy met—for the first time—Midwestern teens who grew up in the suburbs, who attended schools without police assigned to them full time, and who had fathers who were physicians, lawyers, and business owners. Though building relationships with suburban, middle-class teens rarely counts as a "socially

broadening" experience, it was for me. Given the subcultural shock of this transitional period in my own life, it is no surprise that I became a cultural sociologist who studies American religion and American education.

Thus, when I began working as a professor, I did not have to look far for a research project that interested me: I wanted to make sense of the first year out, for various sorts of teens, who head off into various settings, and who thus discover important things about themselves and the world. Generalizing from my own experience (always foolish, but I did it anyway), I believed that the majority of teens who headed off to college had broadening, if not liberating, experiences akin to my own during their first year out, while the majority of teens who stayed home did not.[1] That is, of course, what college admissions offices sell to prospective students. It is also what keeps an entire college admission industry in business—with guidebook authors promising readers "any one of the 40 colleges profiled here will . . . give you a rich, full life; . . . they will raise trajectories, strengthen skills, double talents, develop value systems, and impart confidence."[2] And it is also what professors like me tell each other after we toil all semester to convey something important to our students, to no observable effect. "Ah, but you are impacting your students even when they don't show it or realize it themselves," a senior and presumably wiser colleague told me. But as I would soon discover, neither he nor I was right.

Most of the mainstream American teens I spoke with neither liberated themselves intellectually nor broaden themselves socially during their first year out. Rather, most teens settled all the more comfortably into the patterns and priorities they formed earlier in their lives. What teens actually focus on during the first year out is this: *daily life management*. That is, they manage their personal relationships—with romantic partners, friends, and authority figures; they manage personal gratifications—including substance use and sexual activity; and they manage their economic lives—with its expanding necessities and rising lifestyle expectations. And to my surprise, they manage these things fairly well—or learn to do so rather quickly. Mainstream American teens navigate many changes in their personal relationships with friends and family; they generally moderate, though sometimes abuse, their use of adult substances and their expression of sexual freedoms; and they adapt to increased economic responsibilities and match consumption patterns with their peers (see chapters 3–4). This is quite a bit for teens to manage during their first year out, leaving most American teens with little time for, and little interest in, much else. The few teens who go beyond daily life management, the ones who demonstrate intellectual

engagement and social broadening, are largely the ones pursuing careers that perpetuate these views of the first year out. They represent the next generation of professors and allied professionals—like therapists, deans, journalists, and guidance counselors—but they do not represent American teens in general.

Why is daily life management the paramount focus of teens? The reasons, I suggest, are both economic and cultural. The economic impetus lies in the new global realities of the American economy. Teens know all-too-well that good jobs are not certain and that even with the right credential there are no guarantees for the future. So unless teens receive a rich inheritance, they know they must complete their own educations and climb their own occupational ladder (affluent parents can make the process easier, but they cannot eliminate it). Post–high school education is therefore viewed instrumentally—as a pathway to a better job and economic security—with most teens accepting their educational hazing and orienting their attention to more immediate matters. Few teens, moreover, indicate any real interest in intellectual engagement or social broadening, which requires an exploration of cultural factors affecting teens' focus on daily life management during the first year out.

Culture, I tell my computer-savvy freshmen, is like our human "operating system." Just as a computer is no more than a mass of useless hardware without an operating system, so too are humans but a mass of organs and tissues without culture. Without culture we would have no language, no knowledge, no meaning, and no life. And just like a computer operating system, there are certain cultural "default" installation settings that, unless overridden, shape how individuals view the world and establish daily practices. I argue that the current default settings in the United States install a popular American moral culture that: celebrates personal effort and individual achievement; demonstrates patriotism; believes in God and a spiritual afterlife; values loyalty to family, friends, and coworkers; expects personal moral freedom; distrusts large organizations and bureaucracies; and conveys the message that happiness and fulfillment are found primarily in personal relationships and individual consumption. Put differently, the vast majority of Americans get a lump in their throat when they hear the wife of a slain police officer sing "God Bless America"; they hope that that slain police officer is now "in a better place"; they respect hard work and individuals who succeed through it; they strive for loyalty to families, friends, and coworkers; they are wary of politics, large corporations, and educational institutions; they accommodate moral liberties to drink,

smoke, gamble, and be active (hetero-) sexually; and they generally pursue happiness through intimate relationships and personal consumption. Unless these default settings are altered, usually to install more specific religious or nonreligious subcultural settings, this constellation of beliefs and practices is characteristic of most Americans (see chapter 2).

The impact of popular American moral culture on the first year out is, consequently, substantial. Consider the place of education in this moral culture: as a large bureaucracy to be wary of and as the tacit means by which diligent individuals attain individual success. Education is the standard pathway to occupational achievement, but it is not a trusted institution beyond its supplying of necessary credentials. I argue that, rather than see schooling as an opportunity to examine oneself and one's place in the larger world, most American teens keep core identities in an "identity lockbox" during their first year out and actively resist efforts to examine their self-understandings through classes or to engage their humanity through institutional efforts such as public lectures, the arts, or social activism (see chapter 5). That lockbox preserves teens' mainstream American identity from intellectual or moral tampering that would put them out-of-step with the communities that shaped them or hinder their efforts to pursue the individual achievement they have always envisioned for themselves. As a teen planning to be a teacher told me plainly and unapologetically, "I know there's all this injustice and stuff in cities—but I could never teach in an urban school; I just want to teach in a nice school, live in a nice house with a big yard, and have kids." Though teens may have a variety of occupational interests, this teen's vision of success is widely shared. She therefore kept her lockbox tightly closed, lest she surrender her "safe and respectable" future for an unknown and dubious one.

Another way popular American moral culture fosters teen preoccupation with daily life involves the expectations it creates about the first year out. Most parents expect their teens to take on greater financial responsibilities following high school graduation, and both those who remain at home for their first year out and those who live at college experience a notable increase in financial obligations and expectations to earn money. This increased financial responsibility then combines with a rising American teen lifestyle to make both work and consumption major components of teen life during the first year out. Yet, as much as earning and spending occupy many teen hours during the first year out, teens are often oblivious to its effect on their schedule. Teens focus their attention instead on the semiadult relationships they now navigate and the adult gratifications (i.e.,

to consume substances and express sexuality) they now claim. It is in this arena that teens, with extensive support from American popular culture, expect to find fulfillment, satisfaction, and happiness. Whatever else it may be that teens are actually doing each day, one can be certain that in the back of virtually every teen mind are thoughts of past, present, or future friends, of partners, of family, and of good and bad times shared with others. Between meeting financial expectations, navigating adult relationships, and handling adult freedoms, it is no wonder that developing competence in daily life management preoccupies teens during the first year out.

As comforting as it may be to learn that teens manage their daily lives fairly well and can pitch their own "life tent" and live in it relatively independently, however, a dark cloud looms on the horizon. The dark cloud is this: most American teens do not question whether popular American moral culture provides a sufficient basis upon which to construct individual biographies or sustain shared lives. Can the private pursuit of happiness through personal intimacy and individual consumption, with a dash of patriotism and a sprinkling of theism, sustain these young Americans should daily life be significantly interrupted or permanently altered? I am dubious. Just as organizations must possess a combination of clear values, defined purpose, and good management to be successful, so must teens. But most teens possess only good management—and have inadvertently pitched their life tents in a flood basin. They remind me of G. K. Chesterton's "practical man," whom he contrasts with his thinking man: "A practical man means a man accustomed to merely daily practices, to the way things commonly work. When things will not work, you must have the thinker, the man who has some doctrine about why they work at all."[3] Contemporary teens are practical men and women. They pitch their tents and manage their daily lives fairly well. But they are not, by and large, *thinking* men and women. Few consider where they pitch their tents or question whether they should be so consumed with daily campground life. Should some calamity befall them individually, or befall us collectively, their tents will be damaged or destroyed and their occupants left without the resources or skills to relocate their campsite or reconfigure their lives. In fact, I suggest that an awful storm passed through the campground already, on September 11, 2001. But after a brief evacuation, American teens returned to their soggy tents and settled back into their daily, and now quite muddy, routines (see chapter 6).

It is ironic that in the same year that American teens gain competence in managing their day-to-day activities, they become equally accomplished

in ignoring the longer-term direction of their lives and neglecting their interdependence with community, civic life, national politics, and global issues. Of course, American teens "know about" these matters, like they know about the Egyptian pyramids or the solar system. Teens know that these things matter to educated types like me. But it is abstract and trivial knowledge, to be regurgitated in an essay, and not useful or important knowledge, to be used to shape futures or determine pathways of action. Few and far between are teens whose lives are shaped by purpose, who demonstrate direction, who recognize their interdependence with communities small and large, or who think about what it means to live in the biggest house in the global village.

Perhaps this is because few and far between are American *adults* whose lives are shaped by purpose, who demonstrate direction, who recognize their interdependence with others, or who think about America's place in the global community—leaving teens with few such adults to model their own lives after. My study is about teens, of course, and not about adults. But my analysis offers readers a window through which they can observe the effect of American culture on youth and also infer something of the future direction of American culture as these teens take their places as the custodians of America for the next generation. No earthly creature knows the future nor what ordinary or cataclysmic events lie ahead, so inferences about the future come with the usual caveats. Still, I cannot help but find it sadly paradoxical that American culture, which is so associated worldwide with individuals who take initiative and pursue freedom, produces so few who actualize those core values.

The young Americans I interviewed and observed, who began their adult journeys between 1995 and 2003, learned to master digital technology as readily as they did walking and came of age knowing only an overscheduled and multitasking society. They are arguably a part of America's most time-efficient generation. The question is, do these new adults know where they are headed, and will they be satisfied when they get there?

SEATED AT A WOBBLY TABLE

Poppy's, Lowanda's, Rob's, and Kristi's stories illustrate many important aspects of American teens' first year out, and I have used their stories to introduce several observations and general interpretations. In this closing section, I will describe a "table" schema I use to organize these interpretations into a more meaningful whole. I envision a table around which the vast majority of American high school graduates gather; that table is the first year out. Tables serve a number of purposes in America—meals, conversations, negotiations, displays, work, and play—and we have all had to tolerate a wobbly one at some point. Though any metaphor is admittedly imperfect, the one I believe best summarizes the first year out for Poppy, Lowanda, Rob, and Kristi is one that positions them (and their peers) around a wobbly table.

Two pedestals support this first-year-out table. One pedestal represents the new economic realities of global America. That is, it represents an American economy that is inextricably tied to the worldwide economy, that has outsourced manufacturing and now is outsourcing technical and support functions, that prefers short-term contracts with an on-call workforce to the long-term consistency of career employees, and that demands long hours from ever more credentialed specialists. The other pedestal represents the popular moral culture of mainstream America. That is, it represents the default American socialization process that generates citizens who celebrate personal effort and individual achievement; express patriotism; believe in God and affirm a spiritual afterlife; value loyalty to family, friends, and coworkers; expect personal moral freedom; distrust large organizations and bureaucracies; and pursue happiness primarily through personal intimacy and individual consumption. (These two pedestals, connected yet distinct, are discussed further in chapter 2.) But note that the first-year-out table, though generally sound, does have a noticeable wobble. This is partly because the moral culture pedestal is starting to crack and partly because the new economic realities pedestal has an internal hydraulic lift that raises or lowers its end of the table on a schedule of its own choosing.

The teens who gather around this wobbly table find two items on it. The first item on the table is an *identity lockbox*, into which teens can place their critical religious, political, racial, gender, and class identities for safekeeping during the first year out (and beyond). Because the table does wobble, most teens make quick use of the lockbox. Besides, everyone else at the table seems to be doing it, and teens like to fit in. The second item on the table is a complex but engaging board game known as *daily life management*. This game has a myriad of pieces and complicated rules: there are pieces representing relationships with peers, family, and various authority figures (e.g., instructors, bosses, coaches)—and a host of possible combinations thereof; there are monies to be earned, managed, and spent; there are social activities to choose and navigate; and there are refueling requirements (e.g., food, clothing, and health) for each player (see chapter 3 for a fuller description). Given the intensity of the game, its interactive nature, and the range of strategies one can apply as it is played, most teens never give a second thought to their use of the lockbox and forget its presence on the table. Some teens, for various reasons, will occasionally peek inside the box, while a select few will keep their critical identities out of the lockbox and try to inject them into the daily life management game.

The encouraging news is that the majority of teens learn to play the daily life management game fairly well. They gain valuable skills in intimate and peer relationships, adjust to changes in their relationships with their families, learn how to satisfy the authority figures in their lives, manage their gratifications, and forge strategies to meet their food, clothing, and money needs. The discouraging news is that widespread use of the identity lockbox diminishes teens' willingness to connect their daily lives to deeper values or larger purposes, or to consider those values and purposes thoughtfully. This not only impedes teens' immediate sense of purpose and direction, it also reduces teens' likelihood of recognizing and valuing their connectedness to larger communities—from voluntary organizations to localities to state, nation, and world.

Please do not view this, however, as just another professor's rant about a new generation of college students—as I have become convinced that my own generation of college students was little different. (In fact, political scientist Philip Jacob demonstrated that college students in the 1940s and 1950s were also similar, which suggests that the 1960s and 1970s—when many campuses witnessed political turmoil and when progressive educational ideals became institutionalized—were the aberration and not the norm.[12]) Rather, my concern is fourfold. First, it is for the teens themselves, who simply seek to pursue happiness as they have been taught, but who find themselves ensnarled by a culture that prioritizes short-term efficiency to the detriment of long-term effectiveness and celebrates superficiality while ignoring those whose lives have been shaped by purpose and connected to community. Second, it is for the parents, educators, and clergy who wish to enrich the lives of youth but who have unknowingly underestimated what adolescents can learn and overestimated what they can meaningfully integrate on their own. Third, it is for scholars who may overgeneralize their own *atypical* youth experiences to youth in general and then become frustrated by the disengaged pragmatism of these newly emerging adults. And fourth, it is for Americans in general, who too readily tolerate lives dominated by everyday urgencies and too quickly distract themselves from the thought that life is not what it should be. (I expand several of these points in chapter 2 and return to all four in chapter 6.)

Though some readers may wish these identity lockboxes would be unlocked and their contents thoughtfully considered and meaningfully evaluated during the first year out, I believe that hope is unreasonable. The global economic forces and slowly deteriorating popular American moral culture that give the first-year-out table its wobble are not about to alter anytime soon. But more can be done to encourage those teens who do want to examine the purpose or direction of their lives—by engaging them at deeper levels *before* and *after* the first year out and by supporting them as they learn the daily life management game *during* the first year out. There is a window of opportunity, for example, to engage some teens more fully with their communities prior to the first year out, when teens have less daily life to manage and more time to integrate community with core identities (particularly if one recognizes the dubious value of most teen employment and the value of community engagement—see chapters 4 and 6). There are also windows of opportunity during the first year out: to earn select teens' trust (which they are surprisingly willing to give to those who demonstrate genuine concern); to ask simple questions like, "Where are you headed?" or "How do you want your life to influence others?" and to listen carefully and thoughtfully to their answers. Some teens do stumble while playing the daily life management game, and this too offers a window of opportunity for adults to suggest that what lies within teens' identity lockboxes might help them sort out some problem. And of course one can relocate programmatic efforts to evaluate identities and form connections to the larger world to points after the first year out, when teens have gained confidence in their ability to manage daily life, and when they may be more willing to peek inside their identity lockboxes. I will expand these suggestions in chapter 6, but must caution here that these nonetheless are heroic efforts that must compete against enormous economic and cultural forces.

The first year out is not the time of dramatic personal change that so many assume it is or it should be. Yet it is a critical time of life management and interpersonal adjustment. Because past patterns matter far more to teens than new options during this year, I found it essential to understand the family, faith, and community starting points of contemporary teens. By understanding these starting points, I was well-positioned to understand—if not predict—the journeys most teens took during the first year out. I examine those starting points in chapter 2.