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**The Three Most Important Questions You Can Ask Your Teenager**

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According to the social scientists, the last of the millennials are now gracing our high school campuses. [The Pew Research Center report](http://www.pewresearch.org/millennials/) on this cohort describes them as "confident, connected, and open to change." I agree. Technology is their metier. They embrace diversity like no generation before them. They seek to serve the dispossessed and the disadvantaged. They work to find green solutions to the environmental mess we have bequeathed them. In this regard, they are focussed and unrelenting: a good thing for all of us.

Beneath their energy and commitment to building a better world, though, is stretched, for too many, a fragile membrane that is easily punctured. We have raised a generation that is plagued with insecurity, anxiety and despair.

Former Yale Professor William Deresiewicz, in his fascinating and controversial book[*Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of the American Elite and the Way to a Meaningful Life*](http://www.amazon.com/Excellent-Sheep-Miseducation-American-Meaningful/dp/1476702713) writes this of the millennials:

A large-scale survey found self-reports of emotional well being have fallen to the lowest levels in 25 year study... fifty percent of college students report feelings of hopelessness; one-third reported feeling so depressed that it was difficult to function in the last twelve months ... They are stressed-out, over-pressured; [they exhibit] toxic levels of fear, anxiety, depression, emptiness, aimlessness, and isolation. (p. 8)

His is not a lone voice. Deresiewicz quotes adolescent expert Madeline Levine from her book [*The Price of Privilege: How Parental Pressure and Material Advantage Are Creating a Generation of Disconnected and Unhappy Kids*](http://madelinelevine.com/category/books/):

Preteens from affluent, well-educated families... experience among the highest rates of depression, substance abuse, anxiety disorders, somatic complaints, and unhappiness of any group of children in this country. As many as 22 percent of adolescent girls from financially comfortable families suffer from clinical depression. (pp. 45-46)

College deans from elite schools join the chorus. [The Stanford Provost](https://wellness.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/taskforce_report.pdf) writes, for example, (and remember that Stanford is now the most selective university in the country):

Increasingly we are seeing students struggling with mental health concerns ranging from self-esteem issues and developmental disorders to depression, anxiety, eating disorders, self-mutilation behavior, schizophrenia, and suicidal behavior. (p. 8)

What gives?

Deresiewicz claims that this generation of highly accomplished, college-bound students have been robbed of their independence because they have been raised in a petri dish for one purpose only: to attend an elite college that ensures their and their families' economic and social status. Instead of being nurtured towards real curiosity and a genuine sense of citizenship, these millennials are conditioned to think that everything they do is for the purpose of looking good in the eyes of admissions officers and employers: you earn good grades not because they mean you are learning something, but rather because they will help you stand out from your peers when applying to the Ivies. You engage in community service not because you wish genuinely to make a positive difference in the lives of others but rather because that is how you burnish your resume -- service as check-off box. You play sports not because they build character and teamwork and are a whole lot of fun, but because you want to try to get recruited for a college team. You study art or music not because you wish to refine your understanding of human nature, creativity and culture but because it will help you look smarter.

There is little intrinsic value in what you do. The result: Many college students who fall apart under pressure because they cannot conceive of the fact that hard work and learning are positive outcomes in and of themselves. They have no sense of who they are or what is important in their lives. They have spent so much time trying to look good that they do not know what "The Good" (consider Plato here) really is. They are walking ghosts of seeming, not of being.

Deresiewicz writes:

All the values that once informed the way we raise our children - the cultivation of character, the development of the capacity for democratic citizenship, let alone any emphasis on the pleasure of freedom of play, the part of childhood where you actually get to be a child - all of these are gone. (p. 50)

He laments:

Beyond the junior careerism, the directionless ambition, the risk aversion, and the Hobbesian competitiveness, the system cultivates some monumental cynicism. Whatever the motives of which they were established, the old WASP admissions criteria actually meant something. Athletics were thought to build character - courage and selflessness and team spirit. The arts embodied an ideal of culture. Service was designed to foster a public-minded ethos in our future leaders. Leadership itself was understood to be a form of duty. (p. 56)

The underlying sentiment, and he is correct about this, is that when we teach our children that outcomes are more important than process they lose the ability to enjoy learning for its own sake. Everything becomes about the end-game. The problem is that the end game - whether it turns out as they anticipated or not - is often not intrinsically rewarding. Each effort, each moment, rather than being full as a part of a rich life is simply degraded into being a mere step in a process that leads to...an existential abyss.

The statistics, as related by college deans, adolescent expert Madeline Levine, Professor Deresiewicz, and others, unfortunately bear this out. We have raised a generation of kids who are taught that appearance is more important than substance and that outcomes are more important than character. As a result, they inhabit empty vessels that lead them to a series of negative behaviors that results in, yes, unhappiness, which they try erase with empty sex, drugs, alcohol, and what Professor Deresiewicz calls "junior careerism and Hobbesian competitiveness." The hookups, drugs, and alcohol, of course, just make this abyss deeper and wider.

We can do better.

Truth is, we know full well that lasting happiness springs from good health, solid values, meaningful work, multiple positive relationships, and selfless service. So how about we cease and desist on the pressure front - and get our eye back on the ball that matters - stop asking What (What grade did you get? What team did you make?) and begin asking Who, Where, and How?

1. Who tells us who we are?
2. Where do we want to go with our lives?
3. How do we want to get there?

Question one is important because forces are lined up (internet, television, movies, advertising, just for starters) that tell us who we are is not about how hard we work, how curious we are, or how much we are willing to make a positive difference to others and to our world in distress. No, these forces say: You are what you wear, what you buy, how thin or buff you are, how many like you (on Facebook or anything else) - or for the elite college bound crowd - where you go to college. When we focus on the wrong things, we create these conditions for monumental cynicism in our kids. Our children need to learn that they are important not for reasons of appearance but for reasons of substance.

Question two is important because if we believe that the only thing that matters is college and job status then how can we not end up frustrated, angry, and lonely? Where we want to go with our lives is intrinsically linked to the question of what leads us to fulfillment and happiness? For most of us the answer is **passion**. We all know we are in the right jobs when how long we work at something is driven by interest and not only about earning a paycheck. The truth is that we are all going to have to work hard to succeed in life, and if that is the case, let's us at least try to work hard on things that matter and that we care about.

Question three may be the most important because how we get anywhere is as critical as where we end up. Kids cheat in school because they think grades are more important than what they learn. They take short-cuts because they believe the longer, harder path has no value or because they are afraid of stumbling or of being seen as someone who stumbles.

They are mean or cruel or uncaring often because they do not like themselves; they feel they cannot make the grade that will earn them a spot at That College. They begin to see others as competitors for those spots - not as fellow-journeyers. Diminished self-respect skulks alongside little respect for others. No one wins.

To return to where we started: The millennials **are** accomplishing great things, caring about important things. But too many of them look inside only to peer into a void that we, at least in part, have helped to create. In our efforts to push our kids ahead, we have forgotten to ask why pushing ahead is important in the first place. What future, what adulthood are they pushing to?

So generation Z is on its way. Let's go back to the basics. Let's help them understand that learning is valuable in and of itself; that hard work, genuine curiosity, and heartfelt passion pave the way to a life well lived; and that real success comes when you can look at your life and say, "I have done my best to make a positive difference in the lives of others and the world we live in."

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