

Chillin' with teenagers

People often have negative views of teenagers. They see them walking in gangs down the streets, hoods up, earplugs in, talking into their phones, or to each other. They might seem like another species, with their own language, dress, gestures, or ways of seeing the world.

As a mother, I can still only wonder. But part of me can still remember, and what I remember reminds me that this time is critical to being happy as an adult, and I must appreciate it in my teenagers, if only from a respectful distance.

I have one son, 17, and one daughter, 18, and so far, I think I've been blessed. Their teenageness – the difficulties that I was always warned about – has never really materialised. But that doesn't mean that I understand them. Their moods, opinions, and ways of being in the world, are not always what I'd choose.

My son is not like my daughter and neither of them, contrary to our shared blood, is particularly like me. Perhaps one day, when they have done their growing, they will become more like me. But in truth, I want them to be themselves, in the deepest way possible, and I am only a guiding influence.

It has always been my intention not to be an overbearing parent, foisting my ways on my children. And now they are no longer children, that intention seems even more powerful. After all, they are so close to independence now, it would be foolish to try to control them more.

My daughter has already ventured to Europe on her own, and travelled alone negotiating foreign airlines, train stations, youth hostels, backpackers, and – more dangerous still – strange men. But she came back in one piece, and her sense of herself has grown, and she is wiser without losing any of her curiosity about life.

Perhaps one of the most inspiring things about teenagers is their curiosity, and the fact they do not see many hindrances in life. They move towards the goals I have already abandoned, with none of the fears or judgments that have impeded me. Their sense of purpose is unsullied by disappointment.

If sometimes they seem naïve, I remind myself this naivete is beautiful and it takes them from one experience to the next with fewer fears than the ones restraining me. When they do not seem curious, but tired, lying languidly on the lounge, I must remind myself that it takes a lot of energy to be a teenager, with all that growing and discovering.

Their emotions toss them around constantly, showing them more life in a day than many of us feel in a week. It is tempting to call them lazy. Tempting to give them something to do. So many adults feel as if they have to engage them in some kind of task, as if there is no value to be had from doing nothing.

But teenagers, unlike mature adults, are discovering the art of being and we are in danger of taking it away from them. Many articles are written how much sleep they need. It is clear, when I see them snuggled under the blankets, that they need to escape too, because the life that beckons also frightens them.

Teenagers are just like us, really. But they come in different guises, to tempt us with the guiles and foolishness of youth. Their music makes no sense to us, but it brings them closer to their own souls. It is tempting to want to turn it down! But turning down their music is turning down the heat of their lives, to suppress the vitality that they by turns indulge and waste.

They have so much to waste. No wonder mature adults look at them with jealousy or frustration or the pain of lost youth. When Wild said youth was wasted on the young, he was looking longingly at the youth he did not want to lose (and perhaps already had). Teenagers are always a reminder of lost youth.

No wonder it is painful to see them engaged in the things we once did! Even though their fashions and their technologies change, they are just like we once were. They rebel, they fight, they learn to love, they eat too much, they eat too little, they fret and they triumph.

When I look at my daughter, I am reminded of the young woman who came to Australia, full of fervour and curiosity about another country, one that seemed brighter and freer than the one she came from. When I look at my son, I am reminded of

my brother, who has foiled us all by getting married, when we thought he was to be the long-term bachelor in the Cliff Richard song.

Both son and daughter are reminders of the teenager I once was, and all the misunderstandings and conflicts that arose from that time. If my own parents were fearful of my own growing, I like to think that I have started to curtail the mistrust and fear of watching my own teenagers grow.

But newspaper articles about teenage deaths from driving dangerously, or drug taking at parties, and even violence among young women, are a constant reminder that society wants to demonise them, and forget they are the young and vital face of tomorrow.

Instead we focus on their education, drilling into them the value of exam results and academic success, but forgetting the other kinds of education that might serve them better – how to have good relationships, how to deal with loss, how to take care of a household, or just how to manage a credit card.

These skills are still neglected. My teenagers do not know how to cook. If anyone else knows how to use the washing machine, you would not know it.

Still, the time of watching over teenagers is short. I would be so sad if I thought that I had wasted it, and not learned from their fresh and perplexing behaviours. Through their learning, I learn too, if more slowly, and fighting years of inherited prejudices and blocks.

And even when they seem not to learn, that is a lesson too, about the way that we continue to do our own thing, even in the face of compelling evidence that it doesn't work!

If my teenagers have taught me anything – and it has been a monumental experience so far – it is the value of accepting another being, whether or not you agree with them. While they are a little bit like us, and take on some of our ways as parents, they are their own people, and will go on to do things that would never have occurred to us.

Life's accidents happen to them as they do to the rest of us. So little of what we do is planned or anticipated. It is hard to watch them stumble and suffer, and even more difficult to restrain the urge to tell them what they ought to do, because in their generation, there is a different set of "oughts" and much of what we learned as teenagers is no longer useful.

Ought they to study with one career in mind? Ought they to save up and buy a house? There are more possibilities than when their parents were young and faced with some of the institutionalised beliefs that are now so often discarded.

Our teenagers are a powerful and beautiful lesson in acceptance of another being, and the unknowns that life brings. Rather than see them as a threat, when they swagger down the road with their iPods, it would be more helpful to see they are creating tomorrow and, when we feel anxious and judgmental about the future, they can help us to chill.

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