

Allen M. Gustafson

Generation X: Its Challenges and Possibilities

Now—here is my secret:

I tell it to you with an openness of heart that I doubt I shall ever achieve again, so I pray that you are in a quiet room as you hear these words. My secret is that I need God—that I am sick and can no longer make it alone. I need God to help me give because I no longer seem capable of giving; to help me be kind, as I no longer seem capable of kindness; to help me love, as I seem beyond being able to love.

—Scout, the twenty-something hero of
Douglas Coupland's novel *Life After God* (359).

Douglas Coupland has become the unofficial spokesperson for contemporary young adults who are referred to both as Generation X and the Lost Generation. Coupland declares his generation to be the first raised without religion. His book *Life After God* is a series of encounters between a young man named Scout and a cast of characters who have numbed themselves with drugs, sex, and pointless jobs and are now awkwardly searching for something more meaningful in their lives. Scout identifies the need that has given rise to this generation's search for something more as an inability to "make it alone." What they seem to lack is a vision of life that is compelling and challenging, and the ability to feel secure in knowing who they are.

The Generation X dilemma is how to construct a secure self-identity in an unstable, deconstructed world. The deconstructed social context of Western culture contributes not only to the identity confusion in the current generation of twenty-somethings, but also to a pervasive crisis of meaning, which is ultimately a crisis of hope. As the struggle to know who they are becomes linked to a search for meaning and hope, the young adult's quest for identity becomes a religious search.

THE PROCESS OF IDENTITY FORMATION

According to Erik Erikson's psychosocial theory of development, achieving a stable identity is a lifelong process, but the period from adolescence to young adulthood marks the most crucial stage in this process. The transition from childhood to adulthood "demands that the

individual synthesize or integrate the wide variety of roles society will increasingly expect him or her to perform. Deciding which of these roles to accept occasions the crisis of this developmental period" (Fuller, 1988:36). Forming an identity means forging a union with one's past, identifying with primary social roles and making tentative decisions about who one wishes to become in the future. All this emerges only through interaction with the social world. For Erikson, the process is located in both the core of the individual and the core of the communal culture.

One of the major tasks of identity formation is adjusting one's self-image and behavioral strategies in light of the feedback supplied by others. A secure identity requires being able to maintain a consistent conception of oneself as well as maintaining a consistent impression on others. This self-conscious judging is informed and grounded by an ideological outlook.

A person needs an ideology to rely on in order to formulate a stable identity during this turbulent stage of life. An ideology provides a comprehensive landscape of how life operates and how one should act, and serves as a backdrop and support system for the person's chosen identity. An ideological system is a coherent body of shared images, ideas, and ideals which enable us to get a handle on how the world is and who we are in it, and in this sense identity formation is a religious quest.

The process of identity formation as both the achievement of self-awareness and the achievement of an effective social role is not settled in adolescence. Sharon Parks identifies a post-adolescent stage of human development (Parks, 1986:74). I agree with Parks, who finds it problematic to presume that identity and social recognition are fully established by the end of adolescence. Although by the end of adolescence the individual has the power of critical reflection, the self-conscious self often lacks the integrity of a social role.

The power of the emerging self arises from the awareness that there are a variety of other selves and other worlds that could become one's identity, and thus the self has the freedom and the responsibility to choose its own becoming. Its power is marked by the capacity to take responsibility self-consciously for choosing the path of its own fidelity. In choosing the path of one's own fidelity, the person commits to who he or she wishes to become and solidifies self-identity. The developmental task of the post-adolescent self is to exercise its new power and claim a path of fidelity by discerning a fitting relationship between self and society.

Although the post-adolescent period is marked by the promise of a new self and world, ambiguity about the character of one's self and world darken the promise. Navigating the ambivalence toward both self and society and choosing the path of one's own fidelity begins

with what Parks terms “probing commitment.” The probing of the post-adolescent is a serious exploration of the adult world and enables the young adult to make a commitment within the relativism revealed by its critical awareness. As one accumulates experience living within the chosen commitments of self and society, the character of one’s commitment changes from probing to tested; the self is not only self-aware but becomes self-reflective as a quality of centeredness replaces the ambivalence of an earlier time.

The period of the post-adolescent probing commitment designates the developmental stage of the young adult and the achievement of identity marks the threshold of adulthood. “*Adult* connotes one’s having achieved the composition of the self-aware self, with its attendant responsibility *for* the self. The qualifier *young* connotes the appropriate exploratory, wary, tentative, and dependent quality that stands at the threshold of adulthood” (Parks, 75). Albeit difficult to quantify, for Generation X, young adulthood usually lasts until one’s early thirties.

A DECONSTRUCTED WORLD

Young adulthood is a time of promise, because it is the birthplace of adult vision. The two qualities of young adult experience that fuel promise and vision are freedom and idealism. The ideal is that which is pure, consistent, authentic, and congruent. The search for the ideal grounds and shapes the pathway of fidelity chosen by the young adult. The pathway is the vision for adult life. This is the only time during the life cycle in which the forces exist to give birth to such a life transforming vision. A young adult’s vision will shape the remainder of his or her adult development. The vision is composed within the larger landscape of social forces, but these forces must resonate with what is authentic to the young adult.

The social world provides the opportunity for vision construction, while the individual supplies the potential for creating the vision. Therefore, the vision is comprised of a blending of social opportunity and individual potential. A deconstructed social context has left young people today struggling to create a vision and solidify an identity without the ideological context Parks finds to be necessary. I am using the term “deconstruction” to mean the critical examination and subsequent breakdown of the traditional meaning-making institutions and structures of Western culture.

Western culture’s deconstruction of the social, religious and political forces at work in the world began with the Enlightenment, the critical rationalism of the eighteenth century. Deconstruction has continued through various forms of sophistry and skepticism that have led to the pervasive “politics of suspicion” of our modern day. The philosophy of the postmodern time we live in is built upon rationalism and empiricism.

Serious critical reflection on the foundations and structures of Western culture is its chief aim. The social traditions and forces of the culture have been placed under the rational, empirical microscope of scientific inquiry. We have learned how these traditions and forces were created, how they have influenced us and what their imperfections and failings are. We deconstructed our world in order to more clearly and fully understand it and our role within it.

Over two hundred and fifty years of deconstructive thinking has enabled us to see things in new and different ways. It has not only shown a spotlight on idolatrous thinking, but it has provided the perspective and ability to move civilization in directions never before dreamed of. The benefits brought by deconstructionism, however, have come at a cost. The patterns of meaning and value that serve to hold life together and give it purpose and direction have come unraveled, and a new generation is coming of age in the throes of a collective crisis of meaning. For young adults, the deconstruction of our social contexts has left a perceived ideological framework that is uninviting, unauthentic, and unappealing.

A WORLD THAT IS UNINVITING

The young people of today have grown up in a social context that can best be described as inhospitable. The breakup of family structures, political and business scandals, the rise in violence and the decline in education, materialism run rampant and the mounting national debt are all signs that the institutions, systems and structures of public life seem broken, fraudulent, or dysfunctional. Public institutions and social forces no longer seem worthy of our trust or confidence and the “politics of suspicion” now functions as guidepost to our thought, attitude and behavior. Three pivotal cultural shifts—the changes in family life, the decline in religious literacy and socialization, and the rise of cynicism about our public life—are all by-products of deconstruction.

As the end of the 1960s marked the beginning of America’s divorce epidemic, the children of Generation X began carrying latchkeys for re-entering empty homes after school. Young people have been able to rely less on parents and their authoritarian guidance and have had to accept greater responsibility for decisions affecting their own everyday lives. As a result, youngsters have experienced greater freedom, but it is freedom accompanied by greater burden, less clarity, less access to the voices of experience and more room to make poor decisions.

Many of today’s young people know little about the religious tradition in which they were raised and have little sense of ownership or belonging to an organized religion. A 1992 Gallup poll revealed that significant numbers of today’s young adults “are turned off by churches and organized religion” and have “a glaring lack of knowledge of the

Ten Commandments" as well as the meaning of other fundamental religious tenets, like Easter (Ludwig, 1995:24). Clearly, the only organized religion young people know about is through their elder's growing cynicism toward Church and their own media exaggerated experience of unyielding patriarchy, pedophilia scandals, sexual phobias and institutional chaos.

This generation of young adults has had real-life civics lessons in which public scandals have become commonplace. They are the only generation born after the Civil War to come of age unlikely to match their parent's economic fortunes. For young people, cynicism becomes the rational response to the constraints that they perceive around them and the disillusionment they have experienced. Today, perhaps more than ever in American society, "the tendency to behave cynically is being reinforced to an unprecedented degree by a social environment that seems to have abandoned idealism and increasingly celebrates the virtue of being 'realistic' in an impersonal, acquisitive, tough-guy world" (Kanter and Mirvis, 1989:7). In citizen and country alike, there seems to be a loss of faith in people and in the very concept of community.

UNAUTHENTIC SOCIAL CONTEXT

Since family, religion, and politics no longer function as the authentic social force they once did in a young adult's formation of vision and identity, economics now plays the leading role in the social theater. The family and religious filter has been replaced by an economic filter. Harvard economist, Juliet Schorr, describes the American persona as *homo economicus*, defined by production and consumption (Schorr, 1991: 136ff.). Americans identify themselves with the things they make, have and use; human value is interpreted economically. Where organized religion has failed to market spiritual values to young people, American business has succeeded. Advertising sells spiritual values, such as belonging, community, intimacy, and love, through clothing and beauty aids, food and alcohol, clothes, and basketball shoes. Young adults have grown up with television, and from an early age have been assaulted with media sales pitches drumming the message, buying and consuming are the way to happiness.

What deconstruction has left us without is what Erikson knew every individual needed in order to take a firm hold upon life and to be able to make confident decisions in the face of seeming ambiguity. Deconstruction has left young people without a coherent, authentic, unified ideology that explains how the world operates. They long for a meaningful vision and a secure self-identity, but the symbolic universe of consumerism creates only temporary happiness for those with resources and frustration and discontent for those without. In the end it is not a universe in which anyone can safely live.

AN UNAPPEALING VISION

For Sharon Parks, identity formation in the young adult is a process of composing meaning as well as being composed by meaning. The ego makes meaning by the “composing and maintaining of pattern, order and significance in the most comprehensive dimensions of our awareness” (Parks, 16). In composing pattern, order and significance for the personal story, the ego relies on the larger patterns provided by the collective stories of the social world. Our dependence on these larger stories for creating significance in our individual stories means we not only compose, but we are also composed by meaning. The ego cannot endure without an accepted and reasonable social pattern and order to support its work.

What stymies the process of vision and identity formation is criticism. Young adults are very aware of what is wrong with everything; from family life, to education, to politics, to the workplace, all that is perceived is criticism. When our collective stories begin with negation we cannot create significance for our individual stories. It is impossible to build on a foundation of criticism, order and pattern cannot begin with negation. Ubiquitous criticism, aimed always at tearing down the institutions and stories of the social world and seldom at building up, is certainly unappealing. Tragically, it has created confusion in young peoples’ minds about what there is to embrace and accept, and this confusion has led to a crisis of meaning.

CONSTRUCTING SELF-IDENTITY IN A DECONSTRUCTED WORLD

Young adults reach the post-adolescent developmental point when a person becomes a self-conscious self, and the authority-bound, conventional way of knowing self and world have fallen victim to the person’s new powers of critical self-awareness. The responsibility of the young adult is to create a vision and to choose the path of one’s own fidelity. Deconstruction has called into question the social contexts which operate as pathways of a young adult’s fidelity. The social pathways available to the young adult all seem questionable and inherently flawed. Claiming and sustaining a personal identity in this environment is a difficult challenge at best, and at worst, leads to confusion, isolation and despair. Often individuals fail to ever move beyond exploration and tentativeness toward a long-term tested commitment.

Our deconstructed culture has left young adults with two ideological options as they struggle to solidify their identity. The one social construct our culture presents almost uncritically is consumerism and the single seemingly legitimate voice in our society is the media. This is the young adult’s first option. What they are selling is a market mythology that defines and values people on the basis of their success,

popularity and power. We are economic men and women, and who we are is what we produce and consume. Vaclav Havel contends that all we have left in the West are "things worth buying." Although we have all been shaped by the market mythology, in the end it fails miserably to satisfy our deepest hungers for meaning or provide us with a vision deserving our long-term fidelity.

The second option young adults have to solidify their identity is to "go it alone." The struggle to form a secure self-identity is at the heart of Richard Rohr's analysis of Western culture's crisis of meaning. Referring to what Joseph Chilton Pierce calls "the cracking of the cosmic egg," Rohr writes, "the symbolic universes, inside of which we lived safely, have largely fallen apart, leaving only the private psyche on its lonely journey toward meaning" (Rohr, 1993:1). What is left is mere episodic meaning. "There is no larger mythic story that explains our lives, and each day we must create some personal moment to make ourselves feel significant or even alive. Each of us has my little story disconnected from any Great Story. That is a lonely and tragic way to live (Rohr, 2)."

Without a legitimate larger story to help us compose our individual story and explain the meaning of our lives, we are left only with "the private psyche on its lonely journey toward meaning." Without a compelling ideology to guide and support, the person is left alone to create meaning from nothing. But, nothing means nothing, unless I decide it means something. The psycho-social process of identity formation is skewed and the responsibility for making meaning falls almost solely on the shoulders of the individual psyche. And so, each day a person is responsible for creating an episode of meaning, "some personal moment" whereby the individual can "feel significant or even alive." There is no outer criteria for support or accountability. There is no scale by which cultures, ideas, persons and moralities can be measured. In a deconstructed world, there is no longer an outer force to help us name who we are.

My argument up to now is I contend, contrary to Erikson, that identity formation is not settled during adolescence. The post-adolescent stage of development is significantly shaped by the ideological framework operative in an individual's social world. Since the contemporary framework is uninviting, unauthentic, and unappealing, for the young adult, the quest for a secure identity becomes a religious search. What does this mean for the Church and its ministry to young adults?

IMPLICATIONS FOR CHURCH

Deconstruction has complicated the young adult struggle of identity formation by taking apart ideological structures and failing to replace them with meaningful substitutes. A meaningful ideology offers young adults a compelling vision of self and world that resonates with

their experience. It fuels their idealism and grounds their vision of adult life which also renews the collective human vision. It strengthens them as they enter into the subsequent developmental challenges of adulthood more fully prepared to reach toward their potential. It is a cornerstone in the psychosocial development of human life.

Although this generation of young adults has struggled, they have managed. They have endured and have found promise in a seemingly barren environment. There is promise in their candor and in their willingness to give generously of themselves. So often they display a penetrating honesty about themselves and their world, their feelings of fear and angst, and their desire and search for something better. Like Scout, the character in Coupland's *Life After God*, many young adults have a secret. The brokenness of the things of their world has been laid bare, everything is flawed and nothing seems sacred. They feel no longer capable of giving, no longer capable of kindness and unable to love. They can no longer go it alone. They need God.

The Church for the first time in many years is in a position to be a place of welcome and hospitality for a generation of young people who are searching. The spiritual hunger that many young adults experience is the result of their being unable to avoid the brokenness of their world and being unable to escape the emptiness of their lives. Their candor is their gift, we need to listen to their honesty, even though we may not always like it.

The Church can take advantage of this generation's openness, and mine the riches of its tradition to give young adults something to believe in. They hunger for a vision that is both compelling and authentic, one they can commit to, and one with the power to name who they are. We in the Church have rich resources within our traditions—the *Imago Dei* which affirms the value and uniqueness of each individual, the incarnation which ties the Spirit and social justice to the earth, Paul's conception of the body of Christ, and the gift of forgiveness which reconciles our estranged relationships—to give young people a positive, unified, comprehensive explanation of self and world. The Church cannot afford to get caught up in management issues of who is in and who is out. Sadly, in response to the social changes and new frontiers that Western society has faced these past decades, some in the Church feel the importance to preach a conversion to moralism, rather than a conversion to mercy.

Generation X, like every generation who has come before them, longs to meet a God of love and mercy. And like every generation they have their pain, struggles and woundedness. They need to know that they are part of a sacred universe, and despite everything that is wrong with our world, this life is ultimately trustworthy. Everything belongs, even our brokenness, and it is through our brokenness that we most

often come to Love. As the Church ministers to this generation of young adults may it be guided by the prophetic words of the songwriter, Leonard Cohen.

“Ring the bells that still can ring,
forget your perfect offering.
There is a crack in everything,
That’s how the light gets in.”

—Anthem

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Allen M. Gustafson is director of the Crossroads Center for Faith and Work at Old St. Patrick’s Church in Chicago. He holds degrees in accounting, religious studies, and ethics.