

Could the apparent lack of commitment among the young of today be caused by misunderstanding of freedom?

Getting a group of youngsters to commit to an activity and to see it through to the end of a project is a real challenge these days. Anyone who runs an educational establishment for teens can attest to this. In the youth club that I run in a suburb of Dublin our aim has always been to help participants in an activity get the most out of it by sticking to the project until the objectives of the activity were realised. For some members the activity required the performance and recording of a well-known rock song, for others the manufacture of a chopper bicycle, other members were expected to design a website. In all cases the greatest challenge was always to get them to stick with the activity for several weekly sessions so as to achieve the desired result. I must admit that many projects that were started with great enthusiasm were never completed.

Little staying power and lack of commitment to a cause is symptomatic of a generation that rely on instant gratification as the basis for decision making. But is this a feature of the teenage years through the decades or can we point to a generational shift? Is there evidence that recent generations of youngsters are finding it harder to make and keep commitments? The decline in marriages and the rising age of those who do marry¹, as well as the decline in life-long religious vocations, seem to point towards an inability to commit for the long haul. There is also less involvement by young people in politics and action groups as evidenced by the drop in membership to youth sections of political parties² and lower electoral turnouts³. Can we identify any factors that might have a clear influence on the decision power of young people of today which might not have been the case in earlier generations?

First we need to clarify what we mean by commitment (or lack thereof). On the one hand by lack of commitment we could refer to certain casualness and lack of staying power which are so apparent in many areas of a teen's life, as illustrated by the example at the start of this article. On the other hand, we should consider as lack of commitment the reluctance to give oneself to another: whether to a person, a cause, an ideal, a job or a calling. It is surrendering one's freedom for the sake of another; placing one's ability to make decisions at the mercy of someone else's will or of some motive other than one's own gratification. By way of illustration, the word 'commitment' translates into Spanish as 'entrega': a giving or an offering – from the verb 'entregar', to give or deliver. It has clearer connotations of giving-of-oneself than the English term. The old joke about the pig and the hen contributing "bacon and eggs" to the farmer's breakfast also serves to illustrate this

¹ See for instance a report from the Office of National Statistics published in the London *Telegraph* on 19/12/06. In the early 1970s, 85% of women were married before they turned 30, in comparison to fewer than 33% in 1996-2004.

² cf. Ballington, J., "Youth and political participation: Tuned in or tuned out?", International IDEA, Oct 2001

³ Gybson, C., "From inspiration to participation – A review of perspectives on youth civic engagement", Carnegie Corp., Nov 2001

angle: the hen was contributing with a donation; for the pig it was a case of 'total commitment'.

I would contend in this article that there is enough circumstantial evidence to indicate that present-day youngsters are finding it harder to make lifelong decisions than their peers from earlier generations. Likewise it can also be argued that it is an even greater challenge for teens these days to stick to choices made until the desired results are reached.

Let's look at the second conclusion first. Adolescents need to live in the present. Their choices are about the here and now, or at most about the next couple of days. This attitude leads to a natural casualness (carefree-ness) about making decisions. At home the tendency is to aim to get one's own way most of the time, rather than to foster unity and long-term relationships with parents and siblings. In school it manifests itself by trying to get by with quick fixes: cramming before exams, lifting material from cyberspace for essays and projects with little analysis or assimilation, etc.

Technology and the media overexposure that teenagers experience at present are compounding this problem. They live immersed in a world of entertainment where the objective is to satisfy all immediate urges and temporarily reduce boredom. Traditional hobbies and the playing of sports are in decline: easy access to fast entertainment (music-to-wear, computer-games, TV and DVDs) is making it harder for modern-day teens to want to engage in activities that require effort and stamina. Even relationships are often created in superficial virtual worlds. Internet chatting and social websites – where the need for commitment and bonding is virtually nil – fill many 'idle' hours of millions of adolescents in the Western world. Relationships are becoming 'disposable' – like clothes and toiletries. We can understand why the mobile phone is the perfect working tool for a teenager: plans can be made or changed in minutes without major implications. If a boy is late for a date because he missed the train because he wouldn't get off the computer game, he just rings her and lets her know: no big deal!

Turning now towards an understanding of commitment as the long-term giving of oneself to a cause, we cannot fail to observe that present-day youngsters are less inclined to make life-long decisions than before. A recent study⁴ carried out among Australian 'Generation Y' youths (born between 1976 and 1990) revealed that their level of social concern is not high: they tend to be more self-centered and lacking in altruism than older generations. The study also indicates that Generation Y members are more likely to agree that "morals are relative", and less likely to claim that faith was important in shaping their lives. Less than 20% of those surveyed claimed active participation to any particular church or religious affiliation. What factors can we identify as having an effect on this lack of commitment among the young?

Adults must surely take some of the blame for it. Teenagers need to learn that a life of commitment and self-less dedication brings fulfillment and genuine happiness. But when they look towards their elders seeking role models on which to map their future lives, young

⁴ "The Spirit of Generation Y: Young People, Spirituality and Society" by Fr Michael Mason, A.C.U., 2006

people see unconvincing evidence of long-lasting commitments and loyalties. In their homes many teens experience the damning effects of marital breakdown and divorce. From the business world they hear about people rapidly changing jobs which smacks of institutional disloyalty and lack of staying power. Show biz and sports personalities swap and change partners as if they were items to wear.

However, probably the main reason why young people nowadays are finding it harder to make decisions that require a long-term commitment is due to a failure to understand the true nature of freedom. Many young people consider a life of freedom as the ability to choose without obstacles or constraints; to be able to make decisions in the spur of the moment and often in a vacuum: without reference to any set of values or principles and without taking much care of the consequences of those choices – at least not of the long-term consequences.

Young people today seem to be more individualistic and self-centred than those of previous generations. As the Australian survey found, “the social forces influencing contemporary spirituality – secularisation, the relativism of post-modernity, consumer capitalism, individualism – have a greater impact on this generation.” Such self-centredness is in marked contrast with the requirements of a life of commitment: to be willing to make choices for the sake of a cause other than one’s own.

A proper understanding of freedom requires appreciating the consequences of our decisions for ourselves and for others. Our choices determine the kind of person we become. An effective and truly liberating freedom requires a context, a roadmap that indicates the better of several alternative choices. A prerequisite for an exercise of true freedom is to make decisions within a framework of goals and vision towards the kind of person we want to be and the sort of things we want to do and have. Decisions such as choosing the friends one hangs around with, or deciding to stay away from drugs and unhealthy addictions, or dedicating an extra hour to an important exam rather than playing at the computer, may have serious implications for the kind of life we will ultimately live. For a mature person who knows what he wants from life, freedom is the ability to make the *right* choices: those that take him towards his life goals or ambition. Without a framework of goals and values it is difficult to judge what the *right* choice is.

But in their turn, goals cannot be chosen in a vacuum without a guiding light, without a directional framework. The ‘right’ choice only emerges when you know the difference between right and wrong. The problem is that very few people, particularly among the young, have clear ideas about this difference. Harvard Law professor, Mary Ann Glendon, in a paper for the 8th International Youth Forum⁵, shows how the present generation of students “has little concept of objective morality or truth: they are equipped with few guidelines for judging right and wrong.”

The absence –or remoteness– of God and an abandonment of religious values in many of today’s youth must be considered as a reason why they tend to make decisions in a

⁵ Glendon, M.A., “Generation Y bears unusual burdens”, Pontifical Council for the Laity, Rome 2004.

vacuum, disregarding long-term consequences. A girl who is brought up in a deeply religious home –where God is seen as a loving Father who has a specific plan for her and where she knows that following that plan would lead to happiness on earth as well as in the afterlife– is more likely to avoid sexual encounters until entering a stable, committed relationship in marriage. Whereas the girl for whom God does not come into the picture, and for whom the meaning of man's existence is a total mystery, is likely to ignore the consequences of her actions because she sees them as devoid of any significance.

What emerges from this is that, although parents and teachers cannot do much about the teenage mentality or about the influences of contemporary technology and the media, they do have a grave responsibility to form the character and the consciences of their young so that they are empowered to make *wise* decisions based on sound principles, taking into account the long term consequences for their lives. They must set a good example and become good role models for them. Whereas in the past society's values were for the most part in accord with parental guidance (they complemented each other), that is not the case any more: there is a constant clash in many teens between how their parents brought them up and what society is offering them.

It can also be argued that goal setting should be part of a young person's upbringing and formal education. More effort should be placed by parents and educators on providing young people with the building blocks for a life of commitment based on the proper understanding of freedom. Education towards maturity and responsibility should include helping young people to set goals in key areas of life: family, school, friends, dating, hobbies, addictions, faith. It is a shame that so much emphasis is placed in schools on academic learning and so little on teaching character development. How much easier it would be for young people to develop a sense of commitment and to make the right decisions for their lives if the educational establishments they frequent were to focus on learning for living rather than knowing. As folk singer Joan Baez used to say, "You don't get to choose how you're going to die, or when. You can only decide how you're going to live."

Luisón Lassala,
February 2007