Prompt: How do we leverage the creativity of emerging adults deeply impacted by experiential education towards the future?

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Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
the world offers itself to your imagination,
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting
over and over announcing your place
in the family of things.

~ Mary Oliver, Wild Geese

Emerging Adulthood: Finding One’s Place

The blessing and curse of emerging adulthood is rooted in some basic biology. By age 18, human beings are at their physical peak—fully developed, ready to exercise power, ready to reproduce. But the pre-frontal cortex of the brain—the part that enables us not to act on every impulse, but to consider the consequences of our actions—isn’t fully developed until age 25. Add to this mix that most young adults don’t have young children or aging parents to care for, and you find the description that Jeffrey Jensen Arnett once offered at a conference I attended: emerging adults are at the height of their physical power and the low-point of their social responsibility.

The blessing of this reality is that the whole world seems open to many emerging adults (setting aside for the moment the real socioeconomic and political constraints they face). These are years of possibility and experimentation, often undertaken with a high degree of energy, seriousness, and skill. Consider where we find emerging adults: they are professional athletes, musicians, congressional staffers, corporate junior associates, Teach For America corps members, and social entrepreneurs. The things they can achieve are extraordinary.
But that very openness can also be a curse. The world can seem so open that these years can result in aimlessness, as emerging adults try out various career possibilities and relationships, but don’t commit to any one of them in particular, paralyzed by FOMO (fear of missing out). In the wake of the Great Recession, the image of the college graduate living at his parents’ home without a job is one that too easily comes to mind when we think of emerging adults.

Somewhere between the blessing and the curse lies the driving force of emerging adulthood: the trick of finding one’s place in the family of things. Our task, as their professional, educational, and personal mentors, is to help them find that place. If we can do that, we can empower them to bring their intelligence and creativity into communal life.

**Mentoring Emerging Adults**

Emerging Jewish adults are increasingly the products of experiential education. They have been campers and camp counselors, Birthright Israel participants, youth group members, engaged in various Hillel initiatives, and potentially involved in ongoing experiential education through communal living programs like AVODAH and Moishe House, community learning, prayer, and activism. This is a world many of them know, a world in which many of them are comfortable.

Experiential education, which partakes of certain characteristics of formal education but rejects others, aligns with one of the key realities of emerging adults: They are ambivalent about institutions. On the one hand, they rightly sense that legacy institutions frequently are more motivated by concerns about institutional self-preservation than mission or innovation. This leads to suspicion of institutional life. On the other, they are adept at navigating the institutional demands of large institutions (most notably universities and often large corporations), and some easily identify with institutional life.

All of this reflects the central motion of emerging adulthood, from what theorist Sharon Daloz Parks calls probing to tested commitment. The probing stage is one we recognize: trying out majors in college (even trying out colleges, or trying out time away from school); experimenting with internships, social networks, interests, romantic partners; testing professions, living arrangements, relationships. But eventually that probing settles down, and a firmer sense of commitment develops. “In the period of tested commitment,” Parks writes, “the self has a deepened quality of at-homeness and centeredness—in marked contrast to the ambivalence and dividedness of the earlier period.”

We can choose to ignore this period of probing commitment, waving our hands as we say, “Our organization doesn’t have time for people who aren’t fully committed.” But that would be a mistake. Emerging adults have a great deal to offer: creativity unbounded by the
constraints many older adults have; exposure to skills, theories, and approaches that they’ve learned in college; energy and enthusiasm. All of these can add a tremendous amount to our complementary schools, camps, and other educational settings.

Of course there are risks as well. Unboundedness by the past can mean that emerging adults aren’t aware of history. They may wind up reinventing the wheel. They may come to look at anything old as being obsolete, when in fact there’s plenty of old stuff (like Torah, for instance) of tremendous value.

The transition from probing to tested commitment is the work of mentoring, a word that is probably over-used these days. Mentoring isn’t a small thing. It is more than the occasional lunch or phone date with a senior colleague. Parks defines mentoring this way: “an intentional, mutually-demanding, and meaningful relationship between two individuals, a young adult and an older, wiser figure who assists the younger person in learning the ways of life.” ii A quality mentoring relationship creates the firm yet flexible space for emerging adults to probe, test, reflect, and develop a firmer sense of purpose and self, all the while developing respect for experience and tradition. That is, mentoring is the way young adults find their place in the family of things. Mentoring relationships also have positive effects on the older mentors as well, keeping them fresh, opening their eyes and ears. Older adults, too, need to reflect on their place in the world.

As Parks writes, the greatest success comes in not only one-on-one mentoring relationships, but developing mentoring environments, in which a network of mentors and mentees create a collective space in which to reflect together. Building such individual and communal relationships yields greater resilience, capacity for listening, and imagination, on both the personal and organizational levels.

We hear a lot these days about the crisis of twenty-somethings, the disconnect between older and younger generations. First I’d say that such talk of crisis is, as usual, overblown. But there is what to pay attention to. If we want to engage emerging adults in our communities and institutions, we have to do so not with the short-term aim of preserving our institutions, but with the more genuine aim of listening to and welcoming them into communal life. As individual educators and professionals, we need to become mentors. As a community, we need to develop an ethic and culture of mentorship, in which we welcome and value the gifts that all of us, young and old alike, bring to our collective work.

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Parks, Big Questions, Worthy Dreams: Mentoring Young Adults in Their Search for Meaning, Purpose, and Faith. 127.