

Our Teens Are Not Space Aliens
Why Do We Treat Them As If They Were?
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THE READING

Wikipedia

Ephibiphobia is the fear of youth. First coined as the "fear or loathing of teenagers," today the phenomenon is recognized as the "inaccurate, exaggerated and sensational characterization of young people" in a range of settings around the world. . . .

The word ephibiphobia is formed from the Greek ἔφηβος éphēbos, meaning "youth" or "adolescent" and φόβος phóbos, meaning "fear" or "phobia". . . Today, common usage occurs internationally by sociologists, government agencies, and youth advocacy organizations that define ephibiphobia as an abnormal or irrational and persistent fear and/or loathing of teenagers or adolescence. . . .

The fear of youth, along with fear of street culture and the fear of crime, is said to have been in Western culture for "time immemorial". Machiavelli is said to have realized that a fear of youth is what kept the city of Florence from keeping a standing army. Ancient Venice and ancient Greece are also said to have had floundering public policy because of their fear of youth. . . .

Early American Puritanism has been seen as reliant on a fear of youth, who were seen as embodying adventure and enlightenment, and therefore were viewed as susceptible to "decadent morality". During the Industrial Revolution, Western European and North American popular media was particularly driven to propagate the fear of children and youth in order to further the industrialization of schooling, and eventually to remove young people from the workplace when their labor became unnecessary due to mechanization and the influx of new labor. . . .

"In the 1990s public fear of adolescents mounted", caused by the "increased youth access to handguns, the syndication of territorial youth gangs into illegal drug cartels, racist stereotyping of urban youth, academic and political pandering, media frenzy, and a spate of high-profile school shootings of students by their fellow students".

Media, marketers, politicians, youth workers and researchers have been implicated in perpetuating the fear of youth. Since young people in developed countries are expected to stay out of the workforce, any role for them outside that of consumer is potentially threatening to adults. Selling safety to parents and teachers has also been a driving force, as home security systems, cellphones, and computer surveillance usage is marketed to parents; and x-ray machines, metal detectors and closed-circuit television are increasingly sold to schools on the premise that young people are not to be trusted. These steps are in spite of the fact that experience consistently shows that monitoring youth does little to prevent violence or tragedy: the Columbine High School massacre occurred in a building with video surveillance and in-building police. . . .

The very creation of the terms youth, adolescence and teenager have all been attributed to the fear of youth. . . .

The fear of youth is thought to exist throughout the entire Western world. Sociologist Ray Oldenburg has attributed the generation gap and the "increasing segregation of youth from adults in American society" to "adult estrangement and fear of youth". . . .

"Today citizens as a whole as well as people who work with children live in fear of youth in our homes and schools and on our streets". While "society loves their attractive bodies, youthfulness and commercial firepower", we also "vilify adolescents as a noncontributing drain on the economy and our democracy". In the mainstream media, young people are most often portrayed as self-absorbed and apathetic, uninterested in the common good or in advancing social goals..

Examining the Black Power movement of the 1970s, one researcher wrote, "The common adult dislike and fear of youth is compounded by the teacher's fear—fear of losing control in the classroom, fear of losing one's authority". A specific increase in the fear of youth in schools following the Columbine High School massacre of 1999 is seen as a particular cause in evidence suggesting an overall decrease in student engagement throughout high schools today. Fear of youth has led to the development of zero tolerance policies in many schools, which in turn is attributed as the cause of the increase in arrests for juvenile crime on school campuses, which has promoted the fear of youth and led school administrators to call police for infractions once dealt with internally."

THE SERMON

The shooting and killing at the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland Florida on Valentine's Day sent me back to the sermon I delivered in 1999, just after the Columbine school shooting. Then, as now, people were searching for who to blame. For that sermon I began with the then controversial book, **The Nurture Assumption**, by Judith Rich Harris, in which she asserted that aside from the genes they pass on, parents have relatively little impact on their kids. I found the argument and the evidence she offered very persuasive. I did acknowledge, however, that there was probably a middle ground between her assertion of parental irrelevance and our tendency to blame everything on parents. Even she suggested that one way parents could have impact on kids was by exerting some control over the peer groups with which kids become involved. There are, of course, times when even that is easier said than done. She goes so far as to suggest that there are times when parents need to move or send kids to live with relatives to get them out of the groups with which they are associating. That does not always work, of course: sometimes they seek out similar groups in a new community. Harris did believe that teachers are often in a position to have a significant impact on kids.

[A Tribe Apart]

There was a second book that was somewhat complementary to hers, although it was very different in nature.

Karen's sister, Brooksie, was really excited about a book written by Virginia Hersch, a woman who lived, as she did, in Reston, Virginia. Brooksie, who hosted a cable tv show back then, had interviewed Hersch and was excited about her book, **A Tribe Apart**, which is subtitled, "A Journey into the Heart of American Adolescence."

Reston is a planned community in Fairfax County in Northern Virginia. Karen's father served the Unitarian Church there, and the congregation I served in Oakton was the next closest. We had many members who lived in Reston, so I knew the community reasonably well.

Hersch believed there was a change in how our society viewed adolescents. She wrote:

Over the years, the tone of discourse on adolescents has become shrill and frightened. Increasingly desperate attempts to understand and know them fragment into pieces of behavior that are "good" or "bad." They are labeled and classified like so many phyla in the animal kingdom, by how they look and how they act. Theories abound as to how to manage them, fix them, and improve them, as if they were products off an assembly line . . .

She went on to say:

America's own adolescents have become strangers. They are a tribe apart, remote, mysterious, vaguely threatening. The tribal notion is so commonplace that it is hard to know whether it derives from the kids or from adults, but the result is that somewhere in the transition from twelve to thirteen, our nation's children slip into a netherworld of adolescence that too often becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy of estrangement. The individual child feels lost to a world of teens, viewed mostly in the aggregate, notorious for what they do wrong, judged for their inadequacies, known by labels and statistics that frighten and put off adults.

Hersch, who had kids of her own, decided that in order to understand adolescence, it would be worthwhile to spend three years really getting to know some teenagers, becoming sort of what anthropologists call a participant observer. It wasn't that she pretended to be a kid. She became a nonjudgmental adult who immersed herself in their world. She obtained the permission of the school to become a part of their community. She hung out with the kids and increasingly became their confidant. She told them what she was doing, and she got the permission of their parents to talk with them. She was clear that she would keep the kids' confidences and would not report what she learned to the schools, the police, or parents. She chose one Middle School and one High School and spent a semester attending classes and being around both. She came up with a list of sixty kids who she thought were fairly typical, and then she whittled that down to eight with whom she became very close. It is the stories of those eight that she recounts beautifully in her book.

Hersch's book made no pretense of being "scientific." It was strictly anecdotal evidence. She chose the kids [or they chose each other.] One must decide for oneself whether to trust that the kids whose stories she told were in any way typical.

There were poignant stories of adolescent struggles with defining self, with coping with families, with dealing with peers, with fitting into school, with exploring romance and sexuality, with drug and alcohol use and abuse, with moral and ethical dilemmas of many kinds.

[isolation]

The glasses through which Hersch viewed the adolescents were spelled out at the start of the book, and frequently throughout. She wrote:

The most stunning change for adolescents today is their aloneness. The adolescents of the nineties are more isolated and more unsupervised than other generations. It used to be that kids sneaked time away from adults. The proverbial kisses stolen in the backseat of a car or the forbidden cigarette smoked behind the garage, bestowed a grown-up thrill of getting away with the forbidden. The real excitement was in not getting caught by a watchful (or nosy) neighbor who'd call Mom. Today Mom is at work. Neighbors are often strangers. Relatives live in distant places. This changes everything. It changes access to a bed, a liquor cabinet, a car. The kids have all the responsibility for making decisions, often in a void, or they create an ersatz family with their buddies and let them decide. These days youngsters can easily do more good or bad without other people knowing about it.

One of the most powerful themes of the book is how little parents knew about what their kids were really doing, and part of this is because the parents really didn't want to know. Even when they found evidence, they pretended they didn't know because they didn't know what to do about it.

In the stories of these kids' lives, school came off as not very relevant. Oh, it provided the structure, and there were some teachers who had a very real and potent impact on the kids, but most of the teachers, like the parents, really didn't want to know what was going on for the kids. Many of the teachers were putting in their time, doing their jobs, but were utterly in the dark about whom the kids were and what was happening in their lives. For the most part, school did not engage the kids in any significant way. There were exceptions: teachers who really connected because they were fully present to the kids, and some kids who really connected with the school experience, but these were presented as the exceptions.

[a hunger for linkage]

I did not come away from Hersch's book with the feeling that she was trying to blame the teachers or the school, or the parents, or the kids. She was describing a reality that, for a variety of reasons, we as a society have abandoned our kids. She cited the report of the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development in which it was asserted:

Young adolescents do not want to be left to their own devices. In national surveys and focus groups, America's youth have given voice to serious longing. They want more regular contact with adults who care about and respect them.

Juxtapose this with what Harris said in the **Nurture Assumption**. Take Harris' words as a description rather than as an inevitability. It is clear that for most of the kids in Reston that Hersch described, peers were the major influence, partly because adults were not really accessible. It wasn't that none of the parents cared -- all of them did, although to differing degrees. It isn't that the parents were all tied up in their own problems -- although some were. Hersch asserted that:

Kids need adults to listen to them and serve as role models. . . . What kids need from adults is not just rides, pizza, chaperones, and discipline. They need the telling of stories, the close ongoing contact so that they can learn and be accepted. If nobody is there to talk to, it is difficult to get the lessons of your own life so that you are adequately prepared to do the next thing. Without a link across generations, kids will only hear from peers.

Hersch, I believe, provided a middle ground that is not so clear in Harris. The parents make a difference in the lives of the kids in Hersch's book, but there are limits to what the parents can do - for good or ill. There were the exceptional teachers, or coaches, or employers, or clergy, or youth advisors, or parents for whom the kids babysit, or others in the community who also made a difference - sometimes a critical difference.

While there was no one in Hersch's book who became violent in the Parkland sense, the life of students she recounted provides a context that makes that event more believable. She quoted a Reston police captain who in a 1992 interview said:

One day, if the flow of weapons in the nation is not stopped, a student at South Lakes high school will reach into his locker and grab a loaded weapon and start firing, and when he stops and looks around, "God knows what heart shattering scene will surround him."

I do not believe that the issues those authors raised 19 years ago are any less relevant today. In the face of a tragedy, like the killing of innocent children in Columbine, or Sandy Hook, or Parkland, we search for easy answers. We want to blame the parents, or the guns, or mental health, or the authorities, or the peer group. "Let's arm the teachers and "harden" the schools." Let the schools look more like the prisons as which they function already to so many kids.

The availability of guns is not "THE" issue. It is a very serious issue we need to face, and I will come back to it, but guns are not "THE" issue. Hersch points to the larger issue of the isolation of our teenagers. They will always isolate themselves to some degree and turn to peers - I take that as a given, but the question is are there adults available to them when they want them and need them?

[adolescence is unnatural]

We forget, sometimes, that adolescence is not a given - it is a relatively modern invention. Historically, there were children and there were adults. Most communities had some process by which the young passed into adulthood at the age of 13 or so. We forget that child labor laws were enacted because children, even pre-teens, were sent into factories and mines to work right beside adults and, for a variety of reasons, some of which were humanitarian and some economic, it was decided that children should be protected from work.

Modern western society has carved out a piece of life to which we have given the label "adolescence." It is a time when our young are considered to be neither children nor adults. It is an extended transitional period when our expectations of them are very confused. Although their hormones are raging, many of us expect them not to act on them. In spite of the biological pressure toward sexual expression, we expect them not to behave sexually until we deem them "emotionally ready." That causes a certain amount of tension both within our kids, and between them and adult society.

We are not ready for them to fully accept the roles of adults, but they aren't really children. We don't want them in "real jobs," but we are increasingly dependent upon them to staff our fast food restaurants and grocery stores for minimum wages.

[adult hostility]

It is my experience that there are adults who really resent teenagers - resent their youth and their energy and passion and their freedom. There are adults who are really afraid of teenagers as our reading suggested, in part, I would suggest, because those kids represent a part of themselves which they shut down - repressed - lost touch with. And so they are viewed as dangerous, in need of being controlled. I am troubled by the degree to which our modern high schools increasingly resemble prisons, and many of the so-called "solutions" offered in response to the Parkland tragedy will only increase that. What is the message to teens when we station police at schools, and when we make them pass through metal detectors. Do we have police and metal detectors at Post Offices? When kids go to high school, are the orientation sessions focused primarily on the expectation that the kids will be excited about the learning opportunities or do we stress the rules that will be used to control them, as if they are unruly animals?

[do high schools "work?"]

One question that should be, and must be, asked: Is the modern American high school a humane institution? Is it designed to meet the needs of its clients, the students, or is it designed to meet the needs of the community and staff first?

I heard a fascinating lecture at Chautauqua by Leon Botstein, the president of Bard College and author of the book **Jefferson's Children**. It is Botstein's contention that our whole high school system is, in fact, obsolete and destructive of our young people. He believes that most of what we teach in High School should be accomplished by tenth grade, and that at that point kids should enter the real world where they would interact with adults on a normal basis. Their peer group would thereby be broadened to include people with life experience, not just their age cohort. There would be educational credits available for them to use in a college or technical school or art or music school when they were ready - which would not necessarily be

right away. These credits could be held for use when the kid was ready, and when they used them, immediately or later, they would be treated not as captives, but as free consumers who had choices and were responsible.

Botstein's ideas initially sounded very radical to me. At this point, they are beginning to sound quite practical and overdue.

Look at the dropout rate in high school, and look at the number of kids who stay in school only to disrupt the learning process. We respond with more rules and controls, rather than asking the fundamental question - "Is the high school user- friendly in today's world?" Is it realistic to expect all teenagers to spend seven hours a day listening to academic lectures, sometimes delivered by people who know little about the field and less about the listeners? What we know about the process of learning suggests that human beings cannot learn effectively when running from subject to subject at the sound of a bell. As Botstein pointed out, "the rules of high school turn out not to be the rules of life." In the real world, it is not the jocks or the cheerleaders who are the most admired. (Michael Jordan notwithstanding.)

[an opportunity]

Just as we are sometimes alerted to the presence of significant disease by an alarm set off by a symptom, and it is a mistake to treat only the symptom, I would suggest that the symptom that school shootings represent is pointing to a much larger systemic problem. We need to look carefully at the lives of teenagers because this violence is only one symptom of a much deeper problem that we have failed to recognize.

Teenagers are not aliens. They are not the enemy. They are not crazy. They are human beings who, when you look at it, are being treated by our society in a very crazy way - a way that makes it a miracle that so many survive without serious handicaps.

[guns]

I said I would return to the gun issue. We are told that guns do not kill people, only people kill people. Of course, only people with semi-automatic weapons can kill a lot of people in a short time. There is mental illness in virtually every western industrial nation at rates not unlike ours, but no other nation approaches the proliferation of weapons of war that ours does. People in other nations, like Canada, and Great Britain, and Japan, and Australia, and Germany, and France, simply cannot understand our addiction to weapons.

You may be aware of the statement by former Chief Justice Warren Burger who insisted the Second Amendment "has been the subject of one of the greatest pieces of fraud, I repeat the word fraud,' on the American public." Berger was referring particularly the the modern interpretation of that amendment that dismisses the controlling phrase, "'A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms shall not be infringed.'" In fact, there are scholars who insist that the real intent behind the second amendment was fear of Native Americans and of possible slave revolts - that was the purpose behind those militias. Certainly none of our founders had a dream or nightmare that technology would provide rifles capable of killing at the rate of the AR 15's, or that they would be readily accessible.

[Parkland]

But what I want most to get to is how lemonade may have emerged from the lemons of the deaths at Parkland. I am certain that I am not the only person here is has been blown

away by the maturity, the eloquence, the power of the students from Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School. We are all accustomed to how fast our attention can be drawn away from such tragedies - how many are still thinking about the huge slaughter at Las Vegas last October in which 58 victims were killed, or the shooting of Members of Congress at a softball game last June? The impact of the student survivors from Douglas and their families has been enormous! They have turned their grief into a force for change.

The reaction of the Florida legislators who have voted to arm teachers and label pornography as a public health issue, notwithstanding. And the seeming acquiescence of the President to gun regulation on television on Wednesday, before his evening meeting with the NRA leadership the next day, also notwithstanding, how are we to explain the announcement by Dick's Sporting goods that it would no longer sell AR-15's and both they and Walmart have raised the age for purchase of guns to 21. This is an indication that something is happening. And then there are the withdrawals of support for the NRA by major corporations. Another indication of the winds of change. Will it last? Who can say?

I was fascinated by a Slate article by Dahlia Lithwick, in which she attributes the impact of the students to the nature of the education they are receiving at Douglas High. She writes:

Now it's time for them to change the conversation around education in America, and not just as it relates to guns in the classroom. The effectiveness of these poised, articulate, well-informed, and seemingly preternaturally mature student leaders of Stoneman Douglas has been vaguely attributed to very specific personalities and talents. Indeed, their words and actions have been so staggeringly powerful, they ended up fueling laughable claims about crisis actors, coaching, and fat checks from George Soros. But there is a more fundamental lesson to be learned in the events of this tragedy: These kids aren't freaks of nature. Their eloquence and poise also represent the absolute vindication of the extracurricular education they receive at Marjory Stoneman Douglas.

The students of Stoneman Douglas have been the beneficiaries of the kind of 1950s-style public education that has all but vanished in America. . . .

She attributes their success in part to their school:

Part of the reason the Stoneman Douglas students have become stars in recent weeks is in no small part due to the fact that they are in a school system that boasts, for example, of a "system-wide debate program that teaches extemporaneous speaking from an early age." Every middle and high school in the district has a forensics and public-speaking program. Coincidentally, some of the students at Stoneman Douglas had been preparing for debates on the issue of gun control this year, which explains in part why they could speak to the issues from day one.

The student leaders of the #NeverAgain revolt were also, in large part, theater kids who had benefited from the school's exceptional drama program. Coincidentally, some of these students had been preparing to perform Spring Awakening, a rock musical from 2006. As the New Yorker describes it in an essay about the rise of the drama kids, that musical tackles the question of "what happens when neglectful adults fail to make the world safe or comprehensible for teen-agers, and the onus that neglect puts on kids to beat their own path forward." Weird.

The student leaders at Stoneman Douglas High School have also included, again, not by happenstance, young journalists, who'd worked at the school paper, the

Eagle Eye, with the supervision of talented staff. One of the extraordinary components of the story was the revelation that David Hogg, student news director for the school's broadcast journalism program, WMSD-TV, was interviewing his own classmates as they hid in a closet during the shooting, and that these young people had the wherewithal to record and write about the events as they unfolded.

Despite the gradual erosion of the arts and physical education in America's public schools, the students of Stoneman Douglas have been the beneficiaries of the kind of 1950s-style public education that has all but vanished in America and that is being dismantled with great deliberation as funding for things like the arts, civics, and enrichment are zeroed out.

She concludes:

unless you're drinking the strongest form of Kool-Aid, there is simply no way to construct a conspiracy theory around the fact that students who were being painstakingly taught about drama, media, free speech, political activism, and forensics became the epicenter of the school-violence crisis and handled it creditably. The more likely explanation is that extracurricular education—one that focuses on skills beyond standardized testing and rankings—creates passionate citizens who are spring-loaded for citizenship.

Perhaps instead of putting more money into putting more guns into our classrooms, we should think about putting more money into the programs that foster political engagement and skills. In Sen. Rubio's parlance, Marjory Stoneman Douglas was fostering arrogance. To the rest of the world, it was building adults.

There is another article I found that relates to this that I found inspiring. It is from a blog "One Teacher's Brilliant Strategy to Stop Future School Shootings—And It's Not About Guns" written by Glennon Doyle Melton, the mother of a fifth grader who met with her son's teacher. She learned that the teacher has an uncommon practice:

Every Friday afternoon, she asks her students to take out a piece of paper and write down the names of four children with whom they'd like to sit the following week. The children know that these requests may or may not be honored. She also asks the students to nominate one student who they believe has been an exceptional classroom citizen that week. All ballots are privately submitted to her.

And every single Friday afternoon, after the students go home, she takes out those slips of paper, places them in front of her, and studies them. She looks for patterns.

Who is not getting requested by anyone else?

Who can't think of anyone to request?

Who never gets noticed enough to be nominated?

Who had a million friends last week and none this week?

You see, Chase's teacher is not looking for a new seating chart or "exceptional citizens." Chase's teacher is looking for lonely children. She's looking for children who are struggling to connect with other children. She's identifying the little ones who are falling through the cracks of the class's social life. She is discovering whose gifts are

going unnoticed by their peers. And she's pinning down—right away—who's being bullied and who is doing the bullying. [The blogging parent writes]

As a teacher, parent, and lover of all children, I think this is the most brilliant Love Ninja strategy I have ever encountered. It's like taking an X-ray of a classroom to see beneath the surface of things and into the hearts of students. It is like mining for gold—the gold being those children who need a little help, who need adults to step in and teach them how to make friends, how to ask others to play, how to join a group, or how to share their gifts. And it's a bully deterrent because every teacher knows that bullying usually happens outside her eyeshot and that often kids being bullied are too intimidated to share. But, as she said, the truth comes out on those safe, private, little sheets of paper

As Chase's teacher explained this simple, ingenious idea, I stared at her with my mouth hanging open. "How long have you been using this system?" I said.

Ever since Columbine, she said. Every single Friday afternoon since Columbine. Good Lord.

This brilliant woman watched Columbine knowing that all violence begins with disconnection. All outward violence begins as inner loneliness. Who are our next mass shooters and how do we stop them? She watched that tragedy knowing that children who aren't being noticed may eventually resort to being noticed by any means necessary.

It was because of that article that I chose Trudy Ludwig's children's story about **The Invisible Boy**. I wish I had been more aware of invisible kids – or rather, how I might have responded to kids who I could see were invisible.

I believe that we need to be aware of the lives that our teenagers are living. They are not aliens from space. They are not irredeemably poisoned by their hormones. This small sample of kids from one school illustrate what is possible. How will we respond?

President Obama, in response to these kids, said:

Young people have helped lead all our great movements. How inspiring to see it again in so many smart, fearless students standing up for their right to be safe; marching and organizing to remake the world as it should be. We've been waiting for you. And we've got your backs.

Do we? Do we have their backs?

[Kairos]

Liberal ministers have often reminded their congregations what President Kennedy said about the Chinese character for crisis in which danger and opportunity are linked. That is not true, according to Chinese linguists. The two elements of the character for crisis are danger and the crucial moment.

There is a Greek word which is more helpful. Kairos refers to the "propitious moment for decision or action."

Nonetheless, it is true that "propitious moment" often occurs as a result of a response to crisis. Let us take the present crisis as an opportunity for us to look more closely at the lives of our young adults - at how we treat them, what we expect of them, and what they should be

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able to expect of us. From such a deep look could come the beginning of a change that will serve us all well.