



L'Arche Canada offers this "thought sheet" as a contribution to the public conversation about values and the shaping of the social ethos in which we live. Our perspective comes from two broad sources: (1) from forty years of living together in community as a diverse group of people, differently abled and from various cultural, ethnic and religious backgrounds; and (2) from contemporary thinkers who are open, fresh and responsive to the human spirit and are reflecting deeply on the individual and society today.

The vision and confidence to create a healthy Canadian society lies in the nexus where humanistic thinking and spirituality cross-fertilize. Indeed, today the best spiritual thinking engages contemporary culture with a view to the good of human society and the best humanistic thinking integrates spiritual values. We believe it is possible to live consciously in the gap between an ideal society and everyday reality and to make choices that contribute to the closing of that gap. It is a hopeful view, based on human and spiritual values embodied in daily life.

A Human Future

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Learning from Millennial Youth An Interview with James Penner



James Penner, veteran youth specialist, is Associate Director of Dr. Reginald Bibby's "Project Teen Canada 2008." He teaches Sociology of Youth at the University of Lethbridge, and is co-author of *Soul Searching the Millennial Generation* (2005), and this fall, *Aboriginal Millennials in National Perspective*, and *Ten Things You Have to Know About Today's Teenagers*. Formerly a national youth consultant with InterVarsity Christian Fellowship and a public school educator, James is primary researcher of James Penner and Associates. He and his wife Claire have two adult children.

"Millennial youth" is a sociological term for young people born in the 80s and 90s and coming into their adult years now, in this new millennium. James Penner discusses his learning from his undergraduate students and the results of Project Teen Canada 2008, the final stage in a unique series of national, bilingual research projects examining the values, attitudes, beliefs, behaviour, and expectations of Canadian teenagers. More responsible, conservative, materialistic, more concerned about the future and more steeped in the media than previous generations, "generation Y" faces different challenges.

A Human Future, is a free e-quarterly. Subscribe at www.larche.ca. We do not share our subscriber list. Beth Porter, ed.

Beth Porter: You have a particular interest in "millennial youth empowerment." How do you understand this?

James Penner: For me, "youth empowerment" is a vocational term. I've taught 1,300 Sociology of Youth students at the University of Lethbridge where we have looked at what it means to become an adult today, and what teens learn during the years when they are preparing for adulthood.

Increasingly in our society we're teaching young people how to be consumers rather than producers. Through media and marketing we are aiming at their shallow desires, at their ego. A goal of such marketing is for adults to stay playful and in many ways like children – because this is what keeps them buying things. And at the same time marketing is pitching to

"We're teaching young people how to be consumers rather than producers."

Lauren Nagler



Learning in Swaziland

Blog entries from a job assignment, Spring, '09

In our culture we're rewarded for being proactive and organized. Here those qualities haven't gotten me far. Most of the time I feel like problem solving conversations don't resolve anything. But things do get done, and I recognize that I'm the one that's choosing to be in their culture, so I've changed strategies. I've stopped trying to ascertain what's going to happen when and how. I've stopped trying to think ahead or plan and coordinate to "make things easier."

I'm learning a lot about myself, about other people, about Swazi culture and my own, about poverty and luxury, justice and injustice. The worst of the culture shock is over; however I'd be lying if I said this experience was easy. But maybe that's good. I know deep down that what I'm living here is much bigger than these three months, and I'll come home a different Lauren, I hope a better Lauren.

Lauren Nagler graduated from the University of Western Ontario in 2007. Her entire blog can be read at www.intercordiacanada.org/index.php/staff-blog/comments/mentoring-in-swaziland/



children, encouraging them to develop adult wants, so that consuming becomes a lifestyle throughout the lifecycle.

I think that as a society we need to counter some of the pressures of consumerism and help young people find their deeper values, and where they can joyfully produce and contribute. This is how they will discover their power. When Mother Teresa asked her mentoring priest, "How can I know God's will for my life?" he said, "Follow joy, even if it leads upon a difficult path." For youth, finding meaning is linked to their gifts, their interests, their opportunities, and to being a positive force somewhere on the globe. For example, one of my students who caught this and was particularly adventuresome did a Google search using the words "paid internship Africa" and ended up working in villages in Sierra Leone helping moms learn to read.

If they are not helped, students can end up making life decisions with very little self-knowledge and a set of values largely handed to them by marketers. A student told one of the professors in my workshop, "I'm in nursing because it's flexible hours and guaranteed work, but I hate people." Or a mother said when her son was graduating from high school he went to the internet, put in the words "income and jobs" and "education and jobs," found the highest income with the lowest amount of education, and chose that job. College counselors have mentioned that students bale out of some programs in their second year because they realize that they can't spend the rest of their life behind a desk. But it's taken them that long to discover this! So their desire to be a particular kind of person in the world is becoming more clear, but they have made educational choices based on what they expect will be a good paying job and they experience frustration as they realize that they have not really listened to themselves.

BP: What can help them with this?

My sense is that young people need a slowing down process when looking at their future. We've done an experimental

Greg Rogers



I believe every person's life has purpose and meaning. My role as teacher and coach is to help young people discover their gifts and talents and then challenge them to use these to make the world a better place. Geography class and hockey practice can equally be the milieu.

True, sometimes it's easier to do a task or event ourselves. Sometimes it is difficult to see a student's gifts (even for that student). Through service to others, gifts emerge. Our work is to enable students to take on life roles where this can happen – to lead a group, organize an event – and give them the encouragement, coaching, modeling, to succeed. Sometimes I pair students of different ability so they can help each other. Essentials: respect and trust, then patience, openness to other ways, clear boundaries, partnerships, fun and adventure, experiential learning, and a willingness to take goals to the next level. If we are passionate and creative in engaging them, even lethargic students will get involved and grow.

Greg Rogers is Coordinator of Student Leadership programs for the Toronto Catholic District School Board. "Teacher of the Year" for Toronto Secondary in 2007, he is a nominee for the Ontario Teacher's Federation Teaching Award this year.



twelve-hour silent retreat for university students and they absolutely loved it. So much is going on that you really do need to be still before you can get in touch with who you are and what is really important to you. For this, you almost need a guided atmosphere with some mentors or spiritual accompaniers who can help point out possible next steps toward a path that will be a good fit and meaningful – one where you can find joy in your contribution or service.

This is not just true for high school youth choosing a direction for further education. Often recent college or university graduates find the transition into the work world difficult. I would love to work on developing a "quarter-life crisis" course that could be taught in a retreat setting. Some of these young people are finding their way quite nicely, but there is a significant group who really need some assistance. They have worked hard to get their B.A., taking on considerable debt, and then wonder where they can fit. Or they know what they want to do but they discover that the B.A. isn't enough; they need a Masters or a PhD.

One of the big questions for us as a society is Who is coming alongside youth to listen and help them know themselves? In the survey, two out of three teens say that adults don't respect their opinions. That points to a disconnect for a lot of youth between themselves and the adult generation. Yet, three-quarters of the youth surveyed said they get a great deal of enjoyment from their parents – especially parents who demonstrate warmth and involvement. This should be an encouragement to parents to try to listen and help more with vocational questions. Beyond parents, I think that in most situations anyone who has a genuine care and respect for the young person can gain their attention and give some information that's helpful in finding meaningful work. It would help if more of the many stories of the good that teens do were known to the general public. As adults we need to challenge negative stereotypes.

Our research included a sample of over 800 Aboriginal

youth living on reserves. A healthy trend among these youth was that there seems to be a strong connection intergenerationally. One of their greatest levels of confidence is in the Elders. These youth are very optimistic about their future – the jobs they will get and how they will do financially.

BP: With the results in from the final survey of Project Teen Canada what is the direction of your work now?

I've been led into full time youth consulting, research and speaking. and have set up James Penner & Associates. (The Associates are some of my students.) I will be available to any group across Canada to do youth research and to speak. Besides finishing a report with Reg Bibby on youth ministry implications from the 2008 survey, I am co-authoring a book on the influence of marketing on teens, tentatively titled "Consuming Youth." Also, about a dozen years ago I realized that I did not have an interior life adequate for my exterior role, and that I needed to develop this or get out of youth work. Ever since then I've spent a day a week at the Martha Retreat Centre in Lethbridge. This rhythm is really important to me and I will continue it.



The L'Arche movement was founded by Jean Vanier, in France in 1964. Today there are 136 communities of L'Arche on six continents, 29 in Canada. In L'Arche, people with developmental disabilities and those who come to assist them share life together.

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FOR YOUR INTEREST

In the spring I had decided to take a different vocational direction and to change my major. Over the summer I kept hearing a little voice inside telling me I lacked the qualities for this vocation.

In September some of us were invited to make a 12-hour retreat. We could choose from three retreat directors. I picked Ruth, but I thought that meeting with Ruth might be awkward, that she might not really understand, or try to impose her own ideas on my life. Thankfully, she was not at all like this. At one point she asked, "What do you think God loves about you?" I started to notice how hard it was to acknowledge that God loves things specific to me, not just the things I do. I also saw that while I find it easy to pray for others' needs, I have difficulty praying for myself. These insights opened other doors. All in all, the retreat answered a lot of the questions posed by the little voice.

From blog entry by Lindsey Skakum, University of Lethbridge.

Resources (click on websites)

- Project Teen Canada site www.ptc08.com
- Project Canada Books and Reports (www.projectcanadabooks.com)
 - Reginald W. Bibby with Sarah Russell and Ron Rolheiser, *The Emerging Millennials: How Canada's Newest Generation is Responding to Change and Choice*, (2008)
 - *Macleans*: Optimism of Aboriginal youth—click here; Teens losing faith—click here; Project Teen Canada—click here
 - *Aboriginal Millennials in National Perspective* by Reginald W. Bibby and James Penner (Dec. 2009)
 - *Ten Things You Have to Know about Today's Teenagers*, James Penner and Reginald Bibby (Dec. 2009)
 - L. David Overholt and James A. Penner, *Soul-Searching the Millennial Generation: Strategies for Youth Workers*. (Novalis, '05)
- James Penner: www.pennerandassociates.com
- Benjamin Barber, *Consumed: How Markets Corrupt Children, Infantilize Adults, and Swallow Citizens Whole*. (Norton, 2007)
- Michael Unger, *Too Safe for their Own Good: How Risk and Responsibility help Teens Thrive*, (McClelland & Stewart, 2007)
- Jean Kilbourne, *Deadly Persuasion: Why Women and Girls Must Fight The Addictive Power of Advertising*, (Free Press, 1999)
- Michael Gurian, author writing on boys: www.michaelgurian.com

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PLEASE FORWARD THIS "THOUGHT SHEET" TO OTHERS WHO MAY FIND IT OF INTEREST.