

RUNNING HEAD: ANSWERING THE CALL OF THE ADOLESCENT OTHER

Answering the call of the adolescent other

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*Little Miss Helpful was one of those people who loves to help other people, but who ends up helping nobody. Do you know what I mean?*

The above quote is from a book called Little Miss Helpful that I read to my daughter when she was a small child. It is a whimsical fable about how one's help, when unsolicited by the other, becomes not a help but a hindrance. The origin of Little Miss Helpful's assistance to others is based out of her own *need* to help, rather than her *desire* to answer the call of the other. As minor travesties result from Little Miss Helpful's care, we begin to see this type of help is not only misguided, but a dangerous road of endeavor. While this story is meant for the young, it is applicable for all of us, illustrating a stance that compliments the ethic ideals proposed by Levinas.

We live in a society which cherishes the ideal of individuality and freedom. Mavericks we are and caring mavericks at that. Within all of us (or at least a great many of us) are Little Miss Helpfults. Given our strivings for individual freedom as an ideal, it is no wonder we place such a high emphasis on obtaining this stance for ourselves as well as for our children. How we avoid the pitfalls of Little Miss Helpful's care, while helping the infinitely distant youth define and maintain the sense of possibilities found within their own unique otherness, is the topic of this paper. Using Emmanuel Levinas' philosophy, this paper will attempt to address how we can help our youth based not out of our own *needs*, but rather how we can answer the call of the adolescent other out of our *desire* to help facilitate their growth.

The questions raised in this paper were prompted by a class discussion regarding an excerpt of the film titled, 13. This movie portrays the rapid unraveling of a thirteen year-old girl as she tries desperately to navigate the teenage world and discover her own

identity. The female protagonist's search for identity leads her to hook-up with the "bad girl". She longs to belong, fit in and find the individual value and contribution of her life. To document her passage from childhood to youth she grabs what is available to her - sex, drugs, risky and destructive behavior.

After watching this movie clip, our class engaged in a discussion centering on what possible interventions we would use as therapists to help this young girl. Not surprisingly, the focus of this conversation centered on the freedoms and rights of individuals as they embark on establishing their own unique identity. Several in the class commented on their reluctance to intervene in a youth's quest for identity, fearful they would undermine the development of individuality. This conversation echoed what I believe is a shared societal sentiment. Teenage rebellion is not only tolerated it is seen as the way in which a person develops into adulthood. It is often thought that one must violently break free of the bonds of childhood, and therefore their parents, in order to establish themselves as adult individuals. This form of "teenage rebellion" has in some ways been implicitly sanctioned by our society as the way one makes this life transition. Yet, is this what we want for our youth? Is there a way in which community elders (parents, educators, therapists, friends, neighbors) can respect and acknowledge this important passage without leaving youth floundering along a potentially deadly journey?

Having seen this movie in its entirety and having had my own lived experience both as a rebellious teen and the mother of a rebellious teen, my perspective on this matter is quite different. At the end of the movie, the mother of the girl is finally made aware of the full extent of her daughter's activities. In response to her mother's confrontation, the teen girl is not angry that she has been caught- not angry that her rebellion has been

squashed; rather she is angry that her mother had taken so long to see her behavior. It is my opinion that the daughter in this final scene is angry at her mother for not hearing her call. Within her outrageous behavior was a call for help. It was a call to her mother to help her navigate a world without a road map. Her mother, conditioned by society to protect the preciousness of idealized freedom and individual identity, could not hear her call.

Given the long history of humans, the designation of 'childhood' is relatively a new concept. For the majority of time, children were thought of as merely small adults. The establishment of the idea of an adolescent or teenager is even newer. Not until the 1950's when the movie *Rebel Without a Cause* is released are the masses at large faced with this idea of teenage rebellion. Later, during the cultural revolutions of the 1960's, society's attention is squarely confronted with the notion of individuality. It is during this time period that average folks were informed of our pluralistic society. The absolute otherness of the other was more greatly defined than during any previous time period. We were educated. For the first time this melting pot of a nation was really faced with the idea that we were indeed a nation of many- different cultures, genders, religions, and sexual orientation and that these differences were to be respected.

Because of these cultural changes, our youth since this period are faced with an ever greater amount of choices. Both males and females can now, more than ever before, choose whether or not they want to have families, get married, have careers, etc. Possibilities seem endless and they are far from defined. This is not to say that some more than others are not still limited, but society as a whole has given great respect

towards the maintenance and the facilitation of these choices and possibilities.

Individuality and the freedom thought to accompany it has become a societal prerogative.

Levinas would be pleased with the emphasis we have placed upon developing and allowing for the absolute otherness of the other. However, what are the ethics behind the facilitation of youth towards this end? In this quest for reaching the potentialities of each unique other, how do we as adult members of society, answer the call of our youth?

Although youth are on the road to becoming adults they are not yet adults and not yet ready to-go-it-alone. How do we answer their call- the call that asks us to help them become the absolute adult other?

Michael Meade (1996) in his article titled, “Litima: The inner heat”, explains the *heat* of adolescent energy while describing what is probably the most provocative period in one’s life. He says, litima, the heat of adolescent energy “...can refer to the urge for independence as well as high ideals or it can be the source of ruthlessness and brutality” (p. 57). This energy can be used for poetry or combat, for youth can either, “burst into song or burst into battle” (p. 59). He goes on to explain,

Psychologically, the period of youth is naturally manic and naturally depressive. Because their lives are being remade, they are being pulled to the extremes. One extreme is the heat of battle where life can be made and destroyed; the other is the emptiness and endless reach of solitude. Both require courage to face. On his own, a youth can easily soar into an excess of flight or fall into inertia. In modern societies, it is only when a youth displays an excess of one or the other that his or her predicament will finally draw the attention and concern of adults (p. 61).

Sadly, I believe the predominate way in which we help our youth obtain the courage to navigate the passage into adulthood, has been to give them unguided room in an attempt to let them spread their wings. In a maverick society left with little else, the youth often find their courage through maverick means. As Michael Meade states we

only become concerned when things goes haywire and then we are left dumbfounded as to why.

While one could easily take the stance, similar to those of my classmates, and say that this attitude of giving youth room to grow shows the greatest appreciation and allowance for the infinitely otherness of the adolescent to emerge, it could also be said that this attitude was developed out of the Little Miss Helpful's guidebook for assistance and is devoid of the ethical considerations proposed by Levinas.

Levinas tells us that *need* is distinct from *desire*. My *need* is a hunger that wishes to be fed. It is satiable and always directed towards satisfaction. It is not in need that the complete strangeness of the other is realized, for in need the other is totalized. Rather, it is in *desire* that I respect the other's absolute uniqueness, for in my desire I do not wish to bring about satisfaction. My *need* is for me, my *desire* is for the other. Levinas (1969) writes, "...in need I can sink my teeth into the real and satisfy myself in assimilating the other; in Desire there is no sinking one's teeth into being, no satiety, but an uncharted future before me" (p. 117).

In Little Miss Helpful's world she helps how and when she wants and she does so to fulfill her own need to feel helpful, regardless and despite of what the other calls out. Little Miss Helpful *needs* to be helpful. When someone wants something or is ailing, she doesn't hear why or what specifically he or she needs, she is only concerned with creating a stance that will allow her to appear as a helpful person. Is our response to teens by ignoring, or worse yet by giving implicit sanctions for outrageous behavior, an attempt to answer their call for individuality, or is it an attempt to satisfy our own needs

of vicarious youth, idealized individualism and freedom, or acceptance as ‘good’, ‘nice’ and ‘understanding’ caretakers?

Also, what is this *freedom* we are promoting to our youth? Contemporary society, as well as most existentialists, asserts that *my* freedom is the fundamental basis of existence. In this view, other people are seen as impediments to my freedom, as we are all engaged in a struggle over power, as demonstrated in Sartre’s (1989) description that “Hell is—other people!” (p. 45). Under this lens, it is no wonder adults are inclined to get out of the way of the developing youth. However, Levinas declares that freedom expressed as complete individual spontaneity is a self-deception because the other is always present. “Existence is not in reality condemned to freedom, but is *invested* as freedom” (Levinas, 1969 p. 84). By getting out of the adolescent’s way and acting as if we, as adult caretakers, are the resistant obstacles prohibiting them from owning their freedom, are we in deed removing impediments or are we creating impediments to their realization of true freedom? Levinas (1969) writes, “The alleged scandal of alterity presupposes the tranquil identity of the same, a freedom sure of itself which is exercised without scruples, and to whom the foreigner brings only constraint and limitation” (p. 203). Contrarily, he tells us, “Freedom...is inhibited, not as countered by a resistance, but as arbitrary, guilty, and timid; but in its guilt it rises to responsibility. Contingency, that is, the irrational, appears to it not outside of itself in the other, but within itself. It is not limitation by the other that constitutes contingency, but egoism, as unjustified of itself” (p. 203). The freedom we wish to bestow upon our children should be an invested freedom. It is not simply a freedom that will allow them to do whatever it is that they like, for every act of freedom to be freedom, must be based on more than freedom itself.

The internal fires of adolescence have always raged and will continue to rage. It is not as though we as a society should ignore the fires or try to extinguish them. Conversely, they should be well tended and cared for. How do we care for these fires that burn within the adolescent other? Through *discretion*. Levinas uses the word *discretion* to describe both being *absent* and being *present*. While giving room for individual growth, we do not leave our youth wavering in the wind like a leaf. For them, we should be both *present* and *absent*. Levinas (1969) writes,

For the intimacy of recollection to be able to be produced in the oecumenia of being the presence of the Other must not only be revealed in the face which breaks through its own plastic image, but must be revealed, simultaneously with this presence, in its withdrawal and in its absence (p. 155).

It is true that we can never really know the adolescent other. This unknowing creates an innate separation. While acknowledgement of and respect for the distance between I and the other must be given, the distance must not be so great that I do not hear when the other calls out to me. To truly respect the distant adolescent other, one must be separate yet one can not be so far away that they do not hear the call of this developing other.

When the adolescent other comes to us in all of his or her internal and external expressions of turbulence, we must be wary of totalizing this experience as merely a declaration for independence. Levinas (1969) tells us “The face speaks” (p. 66). While often times the adolescent presents a language filled with insolent speech, we must look closely at the face of this other to obtain his or her true expression. For Levinas (1969), “The manifestation of the face is already discourse” (p. 66). While the adolescent other presents us with the totalized form of teenage rebellion, the individual face of the other breaks free from this form and presents us with true dialogue. This is the difference between *said* and *saying*. Using the example of the character in the movie 13, the teen

through her rebellion appeared to have *said* she wanted freedom from the bonds of childhood. Yet, given her face when confronted by her mother, what she appeared to be really *saying* was she didn't want to-go-it-alone. She was not asking for individual freedom, rather she was asking for help to navigate her entrance from childhood into a new world of adolescence. When her mother didn't hear her call spoken in a whisper, she increased the volume by committing outrageous acts in an attempt to be heard. In expression, one bears witness to oneself. Levinas (1969) writes, "The being that expresses itself imposes itself, but does so precisely by appealing to me with its destitution and nudity-its hunger-without my being able to be deaf to that appeal" (p. 200).

In our attempt to facilitate, encourage and respect the development of the adolescent other, it behooves us to follow the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas by truly hearing the call of these others. As adult members of a community be we therapist, parent, teacher, or friend, need to ask ourselves many important questions concerning our youth. One of the most important being, for whom are we truly providing help? By implicitly encouraging teenage rebellion are we satisfying our *need* to be thought of as understanding caretakers, like Little Miss Helpful? In our 'stepping back', are we fulfilling our *need* not to be viewed as the oppressive 'bad-guy'? In this attempt are we satisfying our *need* to proliferate the societal ideal of individualism and personal freedom? What kind of freedom are we advertising to our youth? Do we encourage the propensity to define freedom as individual spontaneity or do we facilitate an invested freedom? Or do we approach the adolescent other out of our *desire* to help them grow into healthy individuals by truly listening to the dialogue presented by the face? Do we

listen to both the said and the saying? Do we allow the face to break through the bonds of insolent chatter and totalized rebellion to help direct us towards truly hearing their call? Do we, during this period of extreme change, allow ourselves to be both *absent* in order to give them room to grow and at the same time *present* to hear when they call?

References

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