

Our Expectations of Ourselves

Today's teens face many struggles on the road to adulthood. We are labeled, judged, and constricted to an expected social ranking. Technology, the Internet and social media put the world at our fingertips, yet we are undisciplined in our use of it. We need individualism and discipline. If our parents, teachers, communities and organizations lead the charge against the debasing herd mind that has captured us, I believe we can overcome our greatest challenge: the multi-faceted expectation that we will be less than what we can be.

One facet of this expectation is the plethora of labels we face as teenagers. The "gifted" students and "standard" students, the "jocks" and "nerds", the "OCD", "ADD" and "mildly autistic" labels all prohibit students from reaching their full potential. Here is why: a label that multiple people brand you with, whether it be spoken or unspoken, becomes not only their expectation of you but also your expectation of yourself. So when a teenager with a short attention span is marked "attention deficient" and given medication, he is essentially forced to assume that role. It is like a reverse placebo effect: instead of being given ineffective medication to trick the brain into getting better, long-term medication reinforces the idea that there is something wrong with him and gives him little hope of recovering. We become what we are labeled. Likewise the "jock", "nerd" and "standard" titles that we assign ourselves are reinforced by teachers and parents through their expectations of us. Even the "gifted" and "talented" classifications come with certain debasing expectations, like the assumption that a "talented" person wants to pursue a career in their area of expertise. In order to combat these ideas, our communities

need to raise their expectations of all youth. Encourage students to challenge themselves with more difficult classes. Abolish the idea that the “gifted” students in school are “smarter” than the rest. Promote each type of intelligence, not just the academic and kinesthetic kinds, and celebrate the abilities of every teen – because in the real world, we need everyone’s talents. Stereotypes probably won’t disappear, but parents and teachers can play a big role by verbally expressing their knowledge that “we can do this”. When we are told that we can be great – not asked, not forced, but simply expected to be because others know what we are capable of – we will exceed even our own aspirations.

Another challenge that teens face is our infatuation with technology and social media. Our time with friends is truncated, our work is cut into, excessive screen time causes health problems, and thoughtless posts, tweets and texts create drama and potentially serious problems later in life with employers and colleges. It has become such an integral part of our lives that this degrading manner of interaction is not only expected of teens, but also widely accepted. We need parents and leaders to embody the responsible use of technology and to enforce it with us, rather than allowing our screen time to run rampant. “No phone” periods (i.e. family dinners, visits with friends, and homework time) and limits on the number of hours spent in front of the computer and television would help establish good habits for later in life. Organizations and community leaders can also help promote the responsible use of technology. Campaigns such as the Play 60 NFL movement and Screen-Free week (formerly TV-Turnoff week) encourage adolescents to turn off screens and “turn on life.” The County of York should consider endorsing such events and perhaps incorporate their own; for example, a scavenger hunt at a local nature trail. Additionally, public service announcements warning of the

potential employment and health problems could contribute to the cause.

Today's teens face many struggles on the road to adulthood, but ultimately the biggest challenge is ourselves. We have not yet developed the discipline to balance wants with needs, and we have not discovered our hidden power to transcend the labels and expectations put on us. To those leaders who would help us on the road to success, this is what we need: a firm belief in our abilities, and discipline tempered with a knowledge of the importance of responsibility.