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Mis-Educating the Young

David Brooks JUNE 23, 2017

A few months ago I had lunch with a former student named Lucy Fleming, one of the best writers I've taught. I asked her what she had learned in her first year out of college. She said she had been forced to think differently.

While in school, her thinking was station to station: take that test, apply to that college, aim for a degree. But in young adulthood, there are no more stations. Everything is open seas. Your main problems are not about the assignment right in front of you; they are about the horizon far away. What should you be steering toward? It requires an entirely different set of navigational skills.

This gets at one of the oddest phenomena of modern life. Childhood is more structured than it has ever been. But then the great engine of the meritocracy spits people out into a young adulthood that is less structured than it has ever been.

There used to be certain milestones that young adults were directed toward by age 27: leaving home, becoming financially independent, getting married, buying a house, having a child. But the information economy has scrambled those timetables. Current 20-somethings are much less likely to do any of those things by 30. They are less likely to be anchored in a political party, church or some other creedal community.

When I graduated from college there was a finite number of career ladders in

front of me: teacher, lawyer, doctor, business. Now college graduates enter a world with four million footstools. There are many more places to perch (a start-up, an NGO, a coffee shop, a consultancy) but few of the footstools pay a sustaining wage, seem connected with the others or lead to a clear ladder of rungs to climb upward.

People in their 20s seem to be compelled to bounce around more, popping up here and there, quantumlike, with different jobs, living arrangements and partners while hoping that all these diverse experiences magically add up to something.

Naturally enough, their descriptions of their lives are rife with uncertainty and anxiety. Many young adults describe a familiar pattern. They try something out but soon feel trapped. They drink too much, worry about how to get out of a job or a relationship. Eventually they do, which is often easier than the anxiety beforehand. They put their life on pause, which is lonely, while they re-cohere. Then they try something else.

All the while social media makes the comparison game more intrusive than ever, and nearly everybody feels as if he or she is falling behind. Recently I came across a website with popular message tattoos. The ones people chose weren't exactly about carefree youth. They were about endurance and resilience: "I will break but I will not fold"; "Fall down seven times, stand up eight"; "Don't lose yourself in your fear"; "The only way out is through."

And how do we as a society prepare young people for this uncertain phase? We pump them full of vapid but haunting praise about how talented they are and how their future is limitless. Then we send them (the most privileged of them) to colleges where the professors teach about what interests the professors. Then we preach a gospel of autonomy that says all the answers to the deeper questions in life are found by getting in touch with your "true self," whatever the heck that is.

I used to think that the answer to the traumas of the 20s was patience. Life is long. Wait until they're 30. They'll figure it out. Now I think that laissez-faire attitude trivializes the experiences of young adulthood and condescends to the people going through them.

I'm beginning to side with Meg Jay, who argued in her book "The Defining Decade" that telling people "30 is the new 20" is completely counterproductive.

Jay's book is filled with advice on how to get on with life. For example, build identity capital. If you are going to be underemployed, do it in a way that people are going to find interesting later on. Nobody is ever going to ask you, "What was it like being a nanny?" They will ask you, "What was it like leading excursions of Outward Bound?"

I'd say colleges have to do much more to put certain questions on the table, to help students grapple with the coming decade of uncertainty: What does it mean to be an adult today? What are seven or 10 ways people have found purpose in life? How big should I dream or how realistic should I be? What are the criteria we should think about before shacking up? What is the cure for sadness? What do I want and what is truly worth wanting?

Before, there were social structures that could guide young adults as they gradually figured out the big questions of life. Now, those structures are gone. Young people are confronted by the existential questions right away. They're going to feel lost if they have no sense of what they're pointing toward, if they have no vision of the holy grails on the distant shore.

Paul Krugman is off today.

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A version of this op-ed appears in print on June 23, 2017, on Page A27 of the New York edition with the headline: Mis-Educating The Young.