

Avoiding the “Failure to Launch” Syndrome (2 Tim 2:2)

With the bowl of “Extra butter” microwave popcorn, adequately topped with extra melted butter (race you to heaven!) and the homemade lemon Slurpee™ that I crafted in my “Magic bullet”™, my wife and I recently watched Matthew McConaughey and Sarah Jessica Parker’s latest, “Failure to Launch”. It was our weekly “in house” date night where so often Hollywood gives me fodder for theological truths and cultural insights. We were in no way let down with this one.

This film parodies a rising U.S. phenomenon of young men (I am certain there are plenty of women as well who fail to launch), returning to home after college and sometimes grad-school to live in luxury in the home they grew up in, and be catered to by the mother that raised them, all while they are out living the good life. In the mean time, these vibrant potential leaders acquiesce to an existence of self absorption and pleasure seeking leaving the world and in many cases for Christians, the Kingdom, unaffected due to their lack of engagement and their absence from leading.

Is this a new cultural phenomenon or is it something that we have somehow created? Chap Clark, recently took six months to interview students in the L.A. school system and tried to make sociological sense of what he heard in his book “Hurt.” Clark concludes that the U.S. culture has experienced another shift in adolescents (a developmental delineation less than 100 years old) now extending well beyond the teens into the late twenties when “late adolescents” will normally begin to settle down (marked by such things as marriage, homeownership and a sense of career attachment) and enter “early adulthood”. Thus the expectation to lead, which is often an adult trait evaporates

as these late adolescents are given permission to continue the formation process while avoiding real responsibility. In her 2004 Psychology Today article, “Raising a Generation of Wimps”, Hara Estroff Arano describes **Endless Adolescence** as “The end result of cheating childhood is to extend it forever. Despite all the parental pressure, and probably because of it, kids are pushing back—in their own way. They're taking longer to grow up. She states that “Adulthood no longer begins when adolescence ends, according to a recent report by University of Pennsylvania sociologist Frank F. Furstenberg and colleagues. There is, instead, a growing no-man's-land of post adolescence from 20 to 30, which they dub "early adulthood." Those in it look like adults but "haven't become fully adult yet—traditionally defined as finishing school, landing a job with benefits, marrying and parenting—because they are not ready or perhaps not permitted to do so.”

Arano also describes **The Fragility Factor** “College, it seems, is where the fragility factor is now making its greatest mark. It's where intellectual and developmental tracks converge as the emotional training wheels come off. By all accounts, psychological distress is rampant on college campuses. It takes a variety of forms, including anxiety and depression—which are increasingly regarded as two faces of the same coin—binge drinking and substance abuse, self-mutilation and other forms of disconnection. The mental state of students is now so precarious for so many that, says Steven Hyman, provost of Harvard University and former director of the National Institute of Mental Health, "it is interfering with the core mission of the university.”

If I were to make a call, I would say that we have both created and helped perpetuate “late adolescents” and in the same breath have delayed the onset of “early adulthood.” In so doing, I have this sinking feeling that we may be missing a golden

opportunity to build leadership during a prime time moment. In one of my very first doctoral classes at ESJ, I was introduced to Victor Turner's observation of Liminality, the middle part of an emerging adult's life cycle described in his classic work "Ritual Process". Liminality is the stage after separation from the parents and before reintegration as an adult. It is the limbo of the in between, the not yet stage just before young adulthood. In the U.S. it is the traditional college years (between 18 and 25 years old). Turner describes this time as a moment where formation is at its peak, learning opportunities are at their peak and community is easily formed. This sounds like the ingredients for excellent ministry and discipleship to me. College ministry is strategic ministry! It is a time that we should urgently take full advantage of.

I feel additional urgency knowing that this upcoming generation, soon to enter college could be the next great generation. Tom Brokaw wrote a book, titled *The Greatest Generation* about those emerging American leaders that stood up to be counted during the unfolding and implementation of World War Two. After reading the stories of young people who were ready to take the mantle of leadership and sacrifice all for the good of the greater cause, I believe we are at the dawn of the Next Great Generation. Many call this generation of millennial mosaics the "correcting generation." I can see my high school freshman daughter fitting that bill to a tee! She once said to me in the car, not being smart mouthed or defiant, that "somebody in the family had to be serious!" (meaning the leadership I was providing was being called into question). If you think of it though, this generation, coming into awareness during the happenings of 911 (my daughter's 10th birthday) in the past five years has seen an example in every form of leadership (corporate, sports, entertainment, political, education, and religious) fall from

grace due to a moral failure. No wonder they are the “correctors.” Will we, who come alive ministering to college students, be ready to give this next generation the tools they need during their college years in order that they can do the most leadership damage as they are launched into the world?

I have the privilege of training traditional college age students (young adults) for local relational mission leadership to lost and disinterested adolescents. I have discovered that it is what I am passionate about. John Eldredge, in his book “Wild at Heart – Discovering the secret of a man’s soul” quoted Gil Bailie:

“Don’t ask yourself what the world needs. Ask yourself what makes you come alive, and go do that, because what the world needs is people who come alive”

I come alive outside the boundaries of a local church parish. I come alive in influencing young people to go on and serve God locally and abroad. I come alive in watching others do greater ministry than I could. I come alive preparing a college senior for his first ministry interview. I come alive in helping a student process their call to an international ministry. I come alive in hearing reports from ministers who have brought the skills they have learned during their college years onto the field where impact the young lives in both para church and vibrant church ministry settings. I come alive beyond the local area – in the areas of others’ possibilities. I come alive in influencing those who will be tomorrow’s leaders in places and with kids we have not yet reached. I come alive in recruiting and training, in research and development, in scouting and developing minor league talent and in investing in and influencing the future of the major league franchise. I come alive in being involved with God in the production of tomorrow’s leaders. I come alive in shepherding shepherds and leading leaders.

Even though I have been involved in this type of training for the past twelve years, I am curious about how I can be more effective in investing in this advantageous time of life to build missional, leadership and kingdom reflexes into these students as their virtues are being shaped and their decision making/ choice skills are being honed. I have begun a study to not only understand this unique time of life, to identify and appreciate this unique time in our U.S. culture and to become aware of the vast volumes of leadership theories emanating from the scholars on whose shoulders I stand, but I am also learning and seeking counsel from many models of emerging leadership training both secular and sacred: 1) like the McManagement training of fast food companies, where gift assessment, mentoring, and progressive experiential leadership development occurs, 2) The basic training and Officer training found in our Military where young men in liminality are stripped down and built up to lead in even the most dire of circumstances, 3) The coaching and training in Minor League Baseball that has filled the pipelines to the ever expanding major leagues since its birth and 4) The relevant and rigorous ministry and theological training offered by some of my Methodist friends who direct Wesley Foundations where the bar has been raised way above offering Tuesday night macaroni and cheese followed by fellowship to a level where deeply committed community of college students study theology and practice in a seminary setting in its truest sense and are deployed to impact the kingdom.

I am drawn to wonder what is the story behind the training when I walk into a fast food restaurant being completely operated and managed by 16 to 25 year olds. I am moved as I replay the DVD's of Stephen Spielberg's film adaptation of Stephen Ambrose's chronicling of the recruiting, training and deploying of the first Army

Airborne para-troopers in World War II. There was something about the courage seen in these young adults (part of Brokaw's "Great Generation") who diligently prepared for a mission that would literally change the face of the globe on D-Day. This was the paradigm that I am challenged to create as I minister to and work with college students where the stakes are just as high and training and courage is needed just as much.

I believe that the collegeunion.org reader is a special person and is in a unique position to Launch Legacy by shaping the next generation of both missional and pastoral leadership through thoughtful training and practical experiences in the world that they find themselves privileged to influence. You are a people who refuses to allow a vicious cycle to begin by lowering leadership expectations for early adults (I refuse to use the term late or delayed adolescents) and thus giving them permission not to have to lead which would eventually attribute to those students becoming benign due to over-fellowship and spiritually atrophied due to under use! You are the coaches, the trainers, and catalysts for creating the kingdom changers that we will pass the baton to for the next lap. With a new academic year upon us, press on! Continue to love those college students, train them, challenge them, push them, encourage them, equip them, evaluate them and then, by all means ... launch them!!!!