

Listening to the Messages in Student Drinking

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I recently overheard two Penn State students talking on a Wednesday afternoon about their plans to get “wasted” that night. These days, more than half of PSU students admit to being “moderate to heavy drinkers” and of these drinkers, on any given night out on the town, almost a half will get wasted—i.e., they will have only incomplete recall of what happened while out drinking.

Recently I have begun to wonder if heavy drinking might be a totally understandable—rational even—response for a young person coming of age in these times. If you find my suggestion spurious, put yourself, if you dare, in the place of a Penn State freshman. You are eighteen-years-old and have spent much of your life in school. It is likely that you have seldom, if ever, provided for your basic needs; you have never grown food; you have never participated in the making of anything real—not a house, not a piece of furniture, not a sweater, not a loaf of bread.

Now, with full awareness of your own limitations, feel what it would be like to look around and see a world in turmoil: terrorism, melting ice caps, unemployment, starvation, disappearing soils and forests, soulless corporations, oppressive governments, genocide, cancer-causing chemicals in the air-water-soil, warfare on all continents, and, everywhere: greed, deceit, cynicism, fear, and despair. And even though you may not dwell on (or even consciously acknowledge) all the pain and dysfunction in the world, the darkness is there—it is the backdrop for your life—affecting your psyche, your soul, your equanimity.

One need not look far to see signs of discontent among young people: Millions of students on anti-depressants; two-thirds of high schoolers confessing to being bored every day; one-third having no day-to-day interaction with teachers; and half seeing little meaning in the school work they are asked to do (results from 2006 National High School Survey of Student Engagement). Indeed, the recent high school graduates that I encounter in my Freshman Seminar at Penn State mostly corroborate these findings, confessing that their main motivation for coming to college is to simply secure a good-paying job. It is not intellectual curiosity and a thirst for knowledge, but “survival anxiety” that goads them into college.

Taking all this into account, I wonder if getting wasted is, often, simply an attempt to cover over, or compensate for, the lack of meaning and higher purpose in student’s lives? Of course, most students don’t see drinking in this way. They tell me they just drink because it’s *fun*. But, again, might the “fun” (or release) come from escaping, for a time, from living in a culture that does very little to draw out their passion, their soulfulness, their courage, their goodness—in short, a culture largely bereft of meaning?

If this seems harsh, I ask that you again put yourself in the place of a Penn State student. But now you are 21 and graduating. Owing to your sixteen years of schooling, you have been successfully conditioned to believe that your only option in life is to follow a constricting life script consisting of finding a job, paying off loan debt, working for 40-50 years, retiring, and calling it a life. It is likely that nowhere in your schooling were you encouraged to imagine what it would be like to listen for, and then follow, your unique calling in life—i.e., likely that nobody ever offered you the time and the bigness of heart to see and draw out your unique brilliance. Instead, more likely than not, the adults in your life engaged your fear, guiding you to be practical, pragmatic, safe—in a word, *dead*.

No wonder you feel confused, powerless and full of foreboding. If you are like most of your generation you lack a vision for how your life might contribute to the common good, how it might engage your heart and allow your spirit to take flight.

Though you don't realize it, your inclination to get wasted might largely be the result of being surrounded by adults who are simply going through the motions of life—just getting by—adults living lives grounded more in resignation and fear than in passion and exuberance. In short, adults who in myriad ways are *wasting* their own beautiful lives. But, again, perhaps I am being overly dramatic here? After all, don't we all survive the challenges of our generation—don't we all overcome our inherited obstacles? Yes, but at what cost—What is lost in the process?

Could it be that what is lost for the young people coming of age today, is a belief in the future, a belief in their own innate goodness, a belief in the inherent goodness of the *other*, along with a capacity to behold with awe and abiding respect the Earth that sustains them? And, again, might the feelings of emptiness and separation—of fear—resulting from these losses, be a root cause of heavy drinking?

Where to go from here? It would be easy, of course, to point fingers—to cast blame—but blame simply creates more separation. So, rather than bashing the drinking student, I suggest that, as adults, we turn our gaze inward and consider all the ways that WE might be failing to live lives of dignity, decency, purpose and passion—lives worthy of emulation by the young.

Next, rather than seeing student drinking as a problem fracturing our community, we might, instead, see it as a call to create community. Specifically we might sit down with young people—not to judge or blame—but to understand and listen and learn.

The path forward isn't through the use of threat, scolding and recrimination. What the young want—just like us—is to be seen, respected, listened to and accepted. When this happens, hearts and minds open and genuine community is created.