

Burning the Toast

All young people are refugees, in effect

When I was a youth worker, we made a point of burning the toast before every rock concert, every games night, every session we ran for young people at our youth centre. One of the youth workers was always instructed to stick two pieces of bread in the toaster and, every time the pieces of bread bounced back up, push them back down until they burnt and started to smoke. Then the worker's job was to waft the smoke out of the kitchen and into the rest of the building so that, when the young people eventually came in, the youth centre would smell like home.

Burnt toast is a powerful mnemonic, a familiar, unmistakable reminder of home, and the youth centre served as an alternative home for many young people, all of whom were, by definition, facing uncertain futures, deprived of what was once familiar, having embarked on puberty and the long, painful journey to adulthood.

In a sense, all young people are refugees. Of course, most aren't fleeing from the horrors of war, from persecution or from economic attack, but all young people share an abiding sense of exile. Think of James Dean, adrift in an unfeeling world, of Holden Caulfield, alienated and isolated. Think of the many young people trying to find something to believe in, someone to trust, some way of trying to understand the vagaries of the world.

In separating from their parents as they must, young people enter into a kind of limbo between childhood and adulthood, a place where no one truly belongs, where the rules are now unclear, where old familiarities and simplicities no longer apply. They're forever exiled from the home they once knew. They can go forward but they can't go back because somehow everything has changed. Their parents have changed. Their bodies have changed. Their enthusiasms have changed. Young people are like refugees, searching for new meaning, for a new purpose, for a new home.

And as refugees they inspire mixed feelings in those of us who have gone before, the occupants of the new land of adulthood who've already settled in, building our fences and laying out our belongings, suspiciously eyeing this latest batch of refugees in case they threaten what we've already established. Refugees are horrible reminders of a time when we, too, were adrift, dependent, hopeless; of a time when we, too, felt scared and unloved.

Everyone has strong feelings about refugees: sometimes feeling protective and supportive of them and sometimes wanting to fight their cause; at other times we feel suspicious, resentful, burdened by their helplessness. We have especially strong feelings about young refugees, separated from their parents, terrified and powerless, at the mercy of powerful people. Do we want to take them in? Can we bear to be reminded of ourselves? Of our old vulnerabilities?

When we see young refugees queuing at the border or clinging to overcrowded boats, perhaps we're grateful that it's no longer us, that we've found a home, a friend, a purpose in our lives. Perhaps we all have some sense of what it might be like to enter a strange building where the sudden smell of burnt toast is a reminder of something lost and something potentially found.