

Talking about Sex and Death and Hatred

Underneath everything, young people are powered by three anxieties

I remember a tutor at university joking that all literature ends up being about sex and death. I think he was right. I'd add 'hatred' to the list and argue that all work with young people ends up being about sex and death and hatred, that these three things motivate all of us most primitively and certainly motivate young people, both consciously and unconsciously.

Sex motivates us because – in the broadest sense – sex runs through all our relationships. As children and young people, we begin to realise that our bodies are developing in readiness for sex and reproduction, that we must learn all sorts of explicit and implicit rules about sexuality, that every relationship has sexual potential and that we must learn to bear the weight of our anxieties about all these things.

Similarly, anxieties about death inform young people's behaviour far more powerfully than most adults would like to believe. Why do good people have to die? Why does everything come to an end? Will I be able to cheat death in some way? What's the point of anything if we're all going to die?

Sex and death and hatred.... All three words typically provoke alarm in adults. Hatred is especially unmentionable in polite conversation because it gets muddled up with notions of 'evil'. But whereas evil involves some sort of moral choice, hatred is at the heart of ordinary human experience. That may sound terrible, but if love exists, then hatred exists as the flipside of love, as what we feel when our love is betrayed, when people break their promises, when the world continues to disappoint us with its ordinariness, its fallibility.

Underneath young people's most extreme behaviours – violence, self-harm, starving, drug-abuse, all the behaviours that endanger the young people we love - will inevitably be anxieties about sex, death and hatred. And of course it's not just young people who are powered by these anxieties. Behind every headline is a tale ultimately concerning one or more of these things.

If these are anxieties underpinning everything, then who helps young people think about and make sense of them? To what extent do they end up as unmentionables hidden away inside a young person yet constantly spilling out, despite that young person's best attempts to repress them?

Recently I've found myself encouraging professionals simply to get the words into their conversations with young people whenever and as often as possible, thereby giving young people permission to start talking about these subjects once they've realized that the adult isn't scared and isn't going to be offended. "How important is sex in your life? Do you think much about death? Tell me about the things you hate...."

If professionals don't use the words, then young people probably won't, and the danger *then* is that we focus on the presenting problem while these most primitive, underlying issues remain unacknowledged. In my experience, progress speeds up once these words have become part of the conversation.