

Why young people fear the future

Relentless positivity can do more harm than good

“You must be excited about the future.... You’ve got your whole life ahead of you.... Your future’s so bright.... Think how much potential you’ve got!”

Why do these well-meaning entreaties fall on so many deaf ears? Why do these encouragements so often fail to inspire young people in the ways that they’re intended?

It’s hard for young people to talk about the part of themselves that *isn’t* looking forward to the future. They’re surrounded by adults urging them on, expecting them to be eager, excited. It sounds cowardly to say that you’re dreading the changes and yet dread is what most young people feel, in part. Caught between the past and the future, some find themselves panicking, regressing, refusing to take responsibility and insisting that their parents and teachers should still be looking after them, should be making things easier. Then they’re accused of behaving like children and shamed for not facing the future with unbounded confidence and desire.

Although some have translated the word as ‘anguish’ or ‘anxiety’, Kierkegaard’s 1844 word is usually translated as ‘dread’. His idea is that, even in our innocence, we still dread those things unknown, those things that don’t yet exist, that are merely possible. So having freedom in their lives is scary, is paralyzing for some young people because of all that could go wrong. Sure, they may have the potential to do good things, but they also have the potential to fail, to make really bad choices. Either way, they have no idea what the future will hold and no amount of relentless encouragement and positive thinking stops that being terrifying. “I’d rather not have my freedom,” many young people are saying, in effect, as they complain of ‘anxiety’, as they refuse to engage with school, with relationships, with the future. “I’d rather be told what to do. I’d rather give up my freedom to choose and just stay in bed and hope that this whole business about the future goes away!”

The real problem with the future isn’t the prospect of climate change, or war, or unemployment, or any of the other daunting challenges young people currently face. There have always been equivalent challenges. It’s a deeper, developmental dread that we underestimate in the young people we love and care about. And we’re part of the problem because we can’t help envying them their youth, their potential. We maintain that – unlike ours - their futures will be glorious, provided that they commit themselves and do the hard work now. As the school year progresses, we urge them on, part-cajoling, part-threatening. The future becomes both a promise and a threat. How good things could be! How bad things could be! Towards the end of a school year, they’re getting ready for various transitions – moving up a year, moving to different buildings, different courses or leaving school altogether - and, as with all transitions, their feelings are mixed. For most, there’s a part of them looking forward with excitement (or at least with curiosity) to the future. But there’s another part looking ahead fearfully, dreading the change, wanting to stay put or even to go backwards. Over the years, I’ve known many young people coming towards the end of school who find themselves wishing that they could start all over again. “I’d do loads more work

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if I had the chance again! I'd get to know more people! I'd try out loads of other things in school!"
It's as if they're asking for a second chance, for the future to be postponed.

I'm on their side because I think that the future *is* scary and that – however much we pretend otherwise - we all have mixed feelings about it. Telling young people that the future is bright and that everything will be fine isn't very reassuring.

"How do you know that everything will be fine?"

"I don't."

'Well don't say it then! I'm not a child!"