LEARNING FROM YOUNG PEOPLE

Mary McKeone

WE MAY NOT HEAR THE PROVERB 'children should be seen and not heard' so often now. But from time to time one still senses a frozen disapproval among a group of adults if a young person asks a radical question or makes an inconvenient statement of fact. How often do we hear comments like these: 'these teenagers are only interested in themselves'; 'they're so noisy!'; 'they ignore other people'; 'they're so rough', etc., etc.

In this article I would like to share some of the experiences that have taught me to respect and to admire young people. These experiences come from my many years as a teacher and a chaplain in secondary schools, from living in communities of religious and university students, and from retreat work with young people in centres around Britain and in schools. Like many others, I have often been startled by the creativity of the young people with whom I worked, and by the refreshing newness of their approach to life.

Learning How to Be a Chaplain

It was difficult learning to be a chaplain, having spent years as a teacher. And it did not help when, after a term on the job, one of the teaching staff died very suddenly and the head of my school asked me to step in for a term while he advertised for another permanent member of staff. During this time I had to switch back to being a teacher, while still spending every spare minute outside the classroom as a chaplain. Not surprisingly, the two jobs clashed, and I discovered how different pupils' expectations of a teacher and of a chaplain are.

One of the techniques I had used as a teacher while trying to get to know young people was to annouce a group meeting of some kind, as though the group were already functioning. I had found that a Poetry

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Club had taken off well when I was teaching; and so I repeated this as a new chaplain. No one came! Feeling disheartened, I tried another approach. After interviewing new pupils individually one term, I noticed how many spent their weekends fishing. So I announced that the Fishing Club would meet in the lunch hour. Two hundred appeared! That taught me a lesson. And from then on all sorts of secrets were confided to me, such as where I could buy the best worms in Durham. I was even invited to join some of their clubs.

Once I asked a seriously uncooperative fourteen-year-old boy to sit outside the chaplain's office until the end of class. School clearly did not interest him, so I suggested that he write a two-page essay for me on something that did. The result was impressive: he arrived smiling the next morning with three pages on motorbikes. It was very interesting, and taught me what persistent study pupils will undertake if pushed from within. His knowledge, skill, care for his vehicle, and love of high speed were obviously a source of joy for him. As I read, it suddenly occurred to me that it must be illegal for a boy so young to be riding a motorbike. I raised the question, but he assured me with a grin: 'Oh, that's OK. I push it across the road and ride in a field!'

Reflections on Death among the Young

Too often people rush to support adults who have lost a relative or friend, and leave youngsters to grieve as best they can. When a fifteen-year-old boy died suddenly at home one evening, his classmates were in a turmoil of misery. I encouraged those who wanted to come to the funeral, but this was not enough. We decided to let the pupils plan their own memorial service and run it in school. It was very moving: they wrote their own prayers, drew pictures, brought mementoes and had a photograph of their friend enlarged and put on the wall of the chapel. Several of them came to the front and shared their memories of him, speaking through tears. They chose the music he liked; all I did was help to stitch it all together. The service healed a lot. Months later they started to come and talk about it, but not at once.

About a year later, I was holding a regular 'Open Chapel' lunch hour, with quiet music playing. Pupils could drop in for a few minutes, or longer if they wished; a good many used to attend. One day a group had just left, the chapel was empty and a boy who had been loitering outside sneaked in—I had never seen him there before—and knelt down. After thirty seconds he jumped to his feet and said loudly: 'I can't do it, man. He has got his eyes on me all the time every time I come into the chapel.' He was looking at the enlarged photo on the wall. I went over and we sat and had a long chat about his friend. He said the boy's mother had had a baby shortly after her son's death and every time he looked at the baby he saw his friend. He clearly had not talked enough about what happened. It is so easy, I realised, to miss the pain that someone else is going through.

I have known many other similar deaths; each of them is a shock, as death is to everyone. I hope I have learned from observing and, above all, from giving enough time to listening. Perhaps the most poignant of all was the boy—an intelligent musician but delicate in health—who composed a beautiful piano piece for the funeral of a classmate who had died in a car accident. He himself died the same term during surgery. The school—and especially his class—was badly shaken, but the music he had composed for his friend stayed in all our hearts.

Different Ways of Praying

During the Falklands War I was working a large state school of about 1,500 pupils. I organized a lunchtime prayer session: the head teacher was startled when I wanted to use the school hall. 'How many do you normally

get in a lunch-time?' he asked. 'Oh, between twenty and thirty', I replied, 'but I think this is touching the lives of many of them'. He somewhat reluctantly let me use the hall. I discussed what we should do with a group of fourteen-year-olds: we decided to put a statue of Jesus on the stage, light candles, play soft music and darken the hall. Then people could come and say their own prayers. About 500 came—some for a few minutes, some for a quarter of an hour or so. Boys who had never gone near the chapel came and stood in the dark at the back with their arms folded, praying for brothers and fathers and uncles who were far away.

Another way I learnt more about prayer at this school was by holding all-night Vigils for Peace. I could not hold them in the school building, so I persuaded the parish priest that I had enough adult help to use the parish hall without his needing to be there. The pupils were joined by some of the other groups I worked with from outside. I gave one hour of the night to each group, and they led their hour of prayer in different ways. One night a group arranged double lines of candles in the centre of the room in the form of a cross. They had said one short prayer for peace, then started very softly to chant 'Give peace a chance'. Gradually everyone joined in, singing and humming. Looking at the circle of faces in lit by the candles, I could see that they were wrapped up in their closeness to God.

Friendship

Teenagers always seem to be looking for new friends, whenever opportunity opens the door. The extended hand of friendship is not limited to people who are already close, with the occasional concession to a stranger, as it can so often be with adults.

I was challenged one day by my friends and colleagues in the Movement for a Better World, who pointed out to me that, although I had been working for many years in the spirit of Riccardo Lombardi, I had never thought to adapt his principles as the basis for a retreat for young people.[1] In shame I turned immediately to the task. I had the idea of building up to a large international event held across Europe: starting with

[1] The Movement for a Better World was founded about 1947 by Fr Riccardi Lombardi SJ. It broke new ground in the Church by extending his teams giving retreats always to include a priest, a religious brother or sister and a lay man or woman. The retreats began with the participants sharing *their* responses to what the Church in the world was about before moving on to what *the*y were prepared to commit themselves to in their local community. I have worked in teams offering retreats to religious orders and later to parishes across the British Isles.

local weekend retreats for a sixteen-plus age group in the different countries where we were based. In the following year we would hold a wider retreat uniting countries with a common language; and in the third year we would gather across all countries. The first local retreat of this kind received an enthusiastic response from the young people involved. They shared some exciting ideas, especially in the areas of justice and prayer. The following year a hundred young people from England, Scotland and Ireland met in the Roman Catholic Youth Centre in Glasgow for the next weekend experience. The outreach of the young people to one another, the ideas that surfaced, the organization of the whole weekend—which was led by young people themselves—were a source of visible joy to them all. The all-night vigils held at the end of each of the weekends were once again key moments which left the participants radiant.

We learned that warm friendships can be formed in this way: many of the young people from our local group exchanged visits with the groups in Scotland in the following months. The international stage of the event was never organized, but I feel sure that the friendships made in Glasgow still endure.

Generosity

We were having a reflection evening for a group of young people who wanted to develop their leadership skills. A girl who had more experience than others, and who had been very helpful in leading younger groups, did not appear. She eventually arrived about thirty minutes late. When it was her turn to speak she revealed the reason: there had been a car accident and a man had been badly hurt. At first she hesitated to interfere, but then it struck her that she was halfway through a First Aid course. She ran from her car, gave the injured man artificial respiration and helped to stem the bleeding before the ambulance arrived. She was told later she had saved the man's life.

Another incident that made me think occurred at school. One lunch hour a group of thirteen-year-old girls burst into my office carrying a baby bird that they had found. It was alive and moving, but it had obviously fallen. As I looked at the girl holding the bird, I was struck by her appearance of extreme poverty. She was exceptionally thin, with sores on her face and bedraggled clothing, but she wanted to feed and care for a creature worse off than herself. As I watched,

the girls excitedly shared their plans for feeding and caring for the bird.

Leadership

Some young people are natural leaders, and it seems to me important to foster this ability. In one area where I lived there seemed to be very few opportunities for young people to have any contact with the diocese. Parish, deanery and diocesan meetings were well established, but young people were only mentioned as trouble-makers, rather than as creative people with a contribution to make.

I chose a school where there were pupils from every parish in our deanery, and invited two from each parish to come to a meeting of their own. (The pupils were invited to gather everyone from their parish to vote for their representatives.) The names were chosen, and I suggested a date. About three-quarters of the parishes were represented at first, and most of the representatives were between thirteen and fifteen years old. I always attended, but I never again chaired the meeting. All sorts of creative ideas surfaced, were discussed, and sometimes put into action. After about six monthly meetings, one of them said: 'I think the Bishop should be here for this. Let's invite him.' I was a little taken aback but said: 'Why not?' So they wrote a letter to him, and he came to the next meeting. I was very nervous about how the meeting would go, but the youngsters acted as normal and placed him in the circle with everyone else. The girl chairing would go around the circle asking each representative's opinion, and at first the bishop would pass his turn and sign to the next person along. Eventually she addressed him directly: 'what do you think, Bishop?' He looked disconcerted to be treated as an equal, but agreed with the ideas proposed to him. I do not think he was given a vote of thanks at the end, but he was told to drop in any time!

Ignatian Retreats

Youth retreats are nearly always group retreats. There are some thoroughly good programmes at the many excellent Youth Retreat Centres (for example, Kintbury, run by the de la Salle Brothers, and Savio House, run by the Salesians, which are among those I know). These are tested and adapted regularly to suit different groups at different times. My own experience of the Ignatian retreat, however, is personal and individual, through training with the Jesuits and through directing adults

in individually guided retreats. These have included a few retreats with university students, who seem to profit greatly from them.

A few years ago I was due to join a group of directors leading a week of guided prayer in a parish. I had worked with many of the guides before, and the coordinator telephoned in a panic to say that, for the first time ever, she was going to have to refuse to accept some people. When I asked why, she told me it was because they were aged thirteen and fifteen. My immediate reaction was: 'Don't do it! Send them to me. I am used to that age group and I will adapt to them.' She eventually agreed—though I could tell she was a little uneasy. I noticed later that she often sat where she could see them as they left my room, and was astonished to see them smiling happily! She was also surprised to hear occasional laughter during the session.

After pondering for a long time about the best approach, I decided to greet each as I would an adult and let them share how they were and what kind of day they had had, and then enquire about school, their favourite subjects, their hobbies and why they wanted to make this kind of retreat. Gradually, without any specific or pointed questions I was discovering in what way they were being drawn to God. Then I gave them a list of thirty scripture quotations as a basis for prayer, and asked them to tell me which was their favourite. This gave a good grounding for the next session. Here are a few of the quotations I chose:

> 'Do not be afraid … for I have redeemed you.' (Isaiah 43:1)
>
> 'You are precious in my sight … and I love you.' (Isaiah 43:4)
>
> 'He chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world … in love.' (Ephesians l:4)
>
> 'You are the salt of the earth.' (Matthew 5:13)

Usually, the next day was fairly straightforward. The teenagers were relaxed, had plenty to say, and were ready for whatever follow-up was given, depending on what they had shared. One difference from adults I noticed here was that sometimes the thirteen-year-old would say 'Why?' when I offered a piece of scripture which seemed appropriate. When I showed her the link I had seen between what she had shared and the next passage, she would smile happily and take it away.

In preparation for directing these young people I had made a file of pictures—some from newspapers, some from the internet, some from my collection of photos of the great masters of art. Depending on their sharing on the third day, or later if it seemed better for that person, as well as the text I offered, I would give them a picture related either to something they had shared or to the text I had given. Both these methods worked well, and after this there was not much difficulty in talking about different methods of prayer.

I always encourage them to have a Prayer Corner in their rooms; this helps to emphasize the importance of the initial moments of recollection before prayer. I was taken aback by the enthusiasm with which each of them built her prayer corner—a meaningful picture, a flower, beautiful stones, symbols. (After the retreat a couple of parents called me to say that the Prayer Corner looked as if it was going to stay.) Some of them also took to writing a journal after prayer. This was valuable in helping them to share specifically on the activities of their day, and in helping me to ask the right questions. So often young people do not feel comfortable talking about some things in their lives with adults, and we have to be sensitive to this and move gently.

A question which can close the discussion completely is 'Do you go to church?', and it is one to be avoided. In the course of conversation it becomes clear what their practice is, but they have come about something different. Yes, church will come into it at some point, but I find that God, Jesus, the meaning of spirituality, are what concern them more. As the retreat progressed, their trust deepened and they shared

quite profoundly. Towards the end of the retreat they had no problem knowing what they wanted to work on in their personal life and calling.

In all my work with young people the most important thing that I have learned is to treat young people with the same serious attention we give to adults. Listening with great sensitivity is a key element in our learning from them. We can say we listen; but have we heard what they are really saying? 'If one gives answer before hearing, it is folly and shame.' (Proverbs 18:13) Looking back, I know I have missed opportunities of reaching out because I have not really heard. Sometimes adults will say: 'Oh, I remember now. They must have been talking about … but I did not realise ….' Certainly I have been guilty of this. Perhaps we should recognise a voice similar to that of Job when he cries out, in a different context: 'Oh, that I had one to hear me' (Job 31:35). We talk glibly about the next generation being called to transform the world; but what are we doing to help them? Perhaps we all need to to reflect on this.

Mary McKeone RSCJ entered the Society of the Sacred Heart at the age of 21. She taught for many years in Malta and at Woldingham, Surrey, after reading English at Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford. She then became a secondary school chaplain in Durham and later in Wimbledon. In between times she has written several books—the latest, awaiting completion, is on the spirituality of young people. At the moment she is offering help within the chaplaincy of Roehampton University.