

Loss, Lament, and the Emotions of Young People Today

Kyle Bender

Marriage and Family Therapist, Austin, Texas

“We may live in a time where our world is changing faster than we are able to adapt,” according to Eric Teller, Director of Google X. We’d most likely agree that it is safe to drop the *may* from that sentence. This can be a very uncomfortable place to exist. When change outpaces our ability to adapt, we can feel lost in uncharted waters with no clear sense of home.

For the young people in our communities and ministries, this has been a particularly unique and challenging time. The range of emotions young people have experienced has run the full spectrum of feelings. Their mental and emotional health has been an area of concern for many years now, well before the pandemic accelerated the trend.

This is not something we can just react to or rely on our old skills or strategies if we want to reach this generation with the gospel. The ability to adapt is going to take time and require new skills and abilities. If the above quote is true, this moment will draw less upon our ability to come up with answers or simply make something happen programatically. We will need the collective wisdom of us all and a few good questions to point us in the right direction.

Peter Drucker once said, “The important and difficult job is never to find the right answers; it is to find the right questions.” The truth is that there is not an easy fix to the myriad of concerns young people are facing right now. While this is not great news, as we slow down this Lent to explore this important topic, we can take hope that solutions are not required for our emotions. Emotions are not meant to be fixed; they are meant to be felt.

Some of us were raised to not trust or even acknowledge our emotions. However, emotions are part of God’s design for humanity. Emotions provide valuable information, information that helps us know ourselves, act in congruence with our values, and process the pain and trauma of our lives. A healthy view of discipleship should acknowledge this reality and help us process our emotions as we encounter them in our day to day lives.

For young people growing up in a world that has us all guessing, you can imagine that the lockdown experiences, news cycle, racial strife, school shootings, natural disasters, wars, and disruptions of the last few years have them feeling unsure and uncertain at the least. Take a moment to imagine what they might be feeling about the world they are going to inherit. As you do, you may recognize some of your own emotions as well.

Validation and Lament

If emotions are meant to be felt, not fixed, then our first task in understanding the reality of young people is to listen. Our goal is not to take away their negative emotions, though we might like to, but to validate them. They don't need us to remove them from the mess (spoiler alert, we can't), but to sit with them in it.

Much of my time in church ministry involved transitions: transitions around people, pastors, and beloved staff, transitions around theology and the moves of people either towards or away, transitions around living in the height of church growth to the longing for the way it used to be.

All too often, we were in a hurry to rush past these moments and fix them, to stop the pain and regain the momentum. A more appropriate response in hindsight would have been to stop the movement and activity and sit for a minute in the grief. (This is certainly true of our current transition as well from "normal" to lockdown to a world changing faster than we can adapt.)

Lament in the Christian faith is a way of processing our grief in the presence of God, noticing the broken shalom in our world and longing for the day when all things are made new.

As a youth pastor, I would often notice that parents felt unqualified or even unable to talk about God with their kids. They felt their faith was not enough and opted to stay quiet instead of feeling clumsy about such an important topic. I heard Reggie Joiner of Orange address this by saying, "Don't worry about the faith you don't have; just give them the faith you do. If you will simply open yourself to God and your child, you will give them a front row seat to God's grace and activity in your life. It doesn't have to be perfect."¹ This front row seat is what they need right now. They need to grieve with us and hear us grieve the realities of our world today. Lament doesn't end with answers or solutions. Lament is a way to process our emotions and trust God in the middle of it.

As we explore the emotional climate of young people, are you willing to let go of desire to fix or control the narrative and meet young people in their grief and lament? In order to do this, however, we may have to deal with some of our own fears and misunderstandings. If you fear that in validating someone's emotions or their experience, you are endorsing beliefs and behaviors that are contrary to your own, you don't have to be afraid. Validating emotions and experience allows others to be seen, heard, and accepted. Validation builds connection. Connection builds trust and mutuality. Trust allows for deeper conversations, growth, and healing. (Who knows, maybe in this process we find our own growth and healing as well!)

Mutuality is important here. This generation, as previous generations, desires authenticity in relationships. They want to truly connect. They are looking for guides to help them make sense of the complexity all around them but will move away from power dynamics or authoritarian stances. As Dr. Henry Cloud noted, "Most times the people who invalidate other people's experience are not aware that they are doing something destructive. In fact, they often think they are helping."

Emotions such as wonder, longing, anger, and anxiety are common experiences for this generation. Experiences of loss, fear, prolonged uncertainty, stress, and trauma have been formative in formative years of development.

Are we willing to accept that while we may not have the answers yet, it is enough to lament with them in this moment? Will we allow ourselves to be curious, suspend judgement, and seek to understand? Will we sit with them in the presence of God and validate their experience? The short answer is we must.

A Generation defined by loss

While the pandemic affected us all, we can recognize some of the unique ways young people experienced this historical moment.

I was on my way to an early morning class in college, when someone jumping in their car said, “Have you not heard? Class is cancelled. Go watch the news.” I had no idea what to expect when I walked into the building to see the tv screen showing the images of the first tower after it had been hit by a plane. Over the next days, weeks, and months I wrestled with what it meant for the world that I was living in. It was clear that day in September meant things had changed.

For this generation, the pandemic and the events of the last few years have been one, if not *the* defining moment. We know what this is like. We’ve had our defining moments as well—moments that changed the world as we know it.

One difference with this generation’s experience is that there was little to no relief. Other generation’s defining moments had some distance to them. It certainly “hit home” and there were consequences, but there was also the ability for some normalcy amidst the pain and chaos. That day at a college in Texas, I knew the world had changed, but New York was across the country, and the terrorists were across the ocean. I could check out of the moment for awhile to be normal before processing more information and making meaning of it. For this generation, there is no distance between them and the pandemic. It was all consuming of their daily lives, habits, emotions, health, and mental well-being.

You might be tempted to say “well everyone’s daily life changed,” but as Brad Griffin states, “Losing a year at 16 is so much different from losing a year at 46.”¹ (In many ways, it was the youngest and the oldest among us that lost the most during this time. It could also be said that losing a year at 75 is much different as well.)

Whether you enjoyed these aspects of your childhood or not, we cannot discount the loss of graduations, proms, sporting events, lead roles in the play, freshman or senior years, the ability to start a lawn business, or earn a paycheck, much less the ability to receive an education without major difficulties and disruptions. It is important to note that different parts of our population have had different degrees of impact here. This generation lost milestones and markers of growing up. They lost daily life of school, friendship, team, and play. They lost boredom and figuring it out with friends and neighbors. Or in some cases, they lost relief from the problems of home life. In return they got isolation, loss, uncertainty, and a life that was limited to a couple hundred or thousand square feet.

If this were all, it would be enough. However, this moment also exposed other places of hurt and pain in our culture. Over the last 2-3 years, they've watched the larger adult world struggle to come up with any viable solutions to (and much less any meaningful consensus on) the pandemic, politics, racial strife, climate change, gender and sexuality, gun reform, and more.

No doubt young people are resilient, and we are counting on that going forward, but we do know that this experience has taken a tremendous toll.

Uncertainty and Mental Health

There has been a lot of attention during the pandemic to the rise of mental health issues in young people. The US Surgeon General issued a statement on the mental health crisis among young people during COVID - 19.¹ Various health agencies came together to declare a national emergency of child and adolescent mental health.¹ In many ways adolescence and uncertainty go together. However, it is important to recognize that this generation is experiencing uncertainty at significant levels, and it is causing harm to mental and emotional health.

In light of this, you can imagine that a young person trying to navigate all of this would have some questions and concerns about how we got here. Commenting on this, Brad Griffin writes, "Forever defined by what they missed, they feel like their government officials, school leaders, families, and God have some explaining to do." They are looking at all of us and wondering what we have to say for ourselves. Before we rush to our own defense, let's name and explore their emotions and experience:

Anger. They might feel angry that this is the world they are inheriting, angry that their agency is limited to make a difference but their lives are affected nonetheless, angry and sad over the loss of milestones and memories.

Anxiety. They might feel anxious that the structures of daily life have been shaken and they have very little sense of control, anxious that those they count on and who are supposed to meet their needs are also shaken, anxious over a sense of ambiguous loss.¹

Trauma. They might experience trauma and pain as they deal with shame, fear, and hopelessness, trauma that as they seek to get their needs met, they cannot, leaving them to wonder if they are the problem, trauma that they were not equipped for or supported through the life-altering effects of the pandemic.

As we listen and lament with them here, we might also get a glimpse of what they have experienced. If we listen to their anger, we might find some breadcrumbs to understanding their world. Anger is often a secondary emotion, so when we listen to anger, we find other emotions present as well. Feelings of helplessness,

insecurity, anxiety, sadness, and grief all can be hiding under our anger and have been a part of their experience of life these few years.

If we listen to their anxiety, we gain a glimpse of their view of the future. We know that prolonged uncertainty leads to anxiety. Among other things, we know that anxiety is a form of worry about the future. If adults can't find meaning or a way forward in our current cultural moment, how might young people feel? Who or what can they trust? Their distrust of institutions is not completely unwarranted.

If we listen to their pain and trauma, we may realize that we have been unintentionally heaping pressure and fear on this generation. We want the best for this generation, but if we rush past their pain to answers as discussed above, we will be asking them to be "normal" or "resilient" or "content" in ways that they don't know how to be. If they can't live up to these ideals, they may be left believing that they are the problem.

You may recognize this dynamic in your own life. Often in the face of difficult situations, we are unable to see things clearly or make sense of what is going on. So instead of critiquing the situation, we turn on ourselves and wonder "what is wrong with me?" In this moment of cultural pain and uncertainty, a young person's tendency may not be to wonder what is wrong with the world, but what is wrong with them.

One Way They Are Coping

As human beings, we are constantly looking to make meaning of our circumstances, our emotions, and our lives.

Springtide Research Institute recently shared data from their report "Navigating Uncertainty: The 2021 State of Religion & Young People."¹ In this report they used the term "unbundling" to describe how young people are approaching faith.

Young people are seeking answers to a wide range of difficult questions but generally do not trust institutions to provide them. So, they are willing to gather these answers from various sources, traditions, and religions. Before we rush to judgement here, the research also shows this is a highly relational process.

They live in a diverse world more diverse than the world many of us grew up in, and they are in relationship with this world and its people. This seeking of answers connects them to their peers and helps them navigate and understand the diverse world they live in. In seeking to understand, they are willing to open themselves up to those they trust. They see all of this as a way of sincerely exploring what it means to be human in this world.

Part of this is also an exploration of identity. Sprintide's research notes that Gen Z reports a gap between how much they perceive they care about an issue and how much they perceive the church cares about that issue, issues like LGBTQIA rights, gender equality, gun reform, climate change. Gen Z reports they care about these 20% to 30% more than they perceive the church does. While we might want to challenge this, we can at least notice that there is a significant gap in perception that we need to pay attention to.

They are willing to “unbundle” a system of beliefs in part because it does not align with their values or their relational ethics. You may agree or disagree, but in some ways, this is encouraging data. Young people are curious about the world they live in, they are looking for reasons to hope, they report deep concern over issues that are affecting the dignity of human life, and they are doing their best to honor the diverse world they live in. In this, I see two values that, as a therapist, I’m constantly encouraging in clients: curiosity and compassion.

If we look closer, we may also find other emotions present in this generation in the midst of the changes in the world. It’s not all loss, fear, and anxiety. It’s emotions of longing, wonder, joy, and hope—longing for a world where whole selves and those of their neighbor can be fully expressed and realized, wonder at the beauty and the complexity of their world and how it all fits together, joy in connection and relationships, hope that the future is not yet written, and their participation can help steer it towards a brighter future.

How Might I...

As we seek to honor this range of emotions, from trauma to hope, let us borrow their values of curiosity and compassion as our guides. If you were to imagine for a moment a desired outcome of all of this disruption and pain, what would you hope for the young people in your life and ministry? If you were to imagine a future where God redeems these moments in the lives of young people, what do you notice, see, feel, or hear as you imagine this? What images come to mind?

Maybe an image of resilience comes to mind, an image of young people growing in wisdom and joy as they learn to walk with God in the midst of harsh realities. Or an image of young people who are better equipped to love their neighbor as themselves. As you imagine these realities and bring these future images to mind, I invite you to develop a simple “How might I...” question that moves you toward this better future. How might I lament with young people in my church to give them a glimpse of God’s grace and activity? How might I learn what really matters to young people and show them that the church cares as deeply? How might I be a steady presence in a chaotic, complex world?

All of these images and questions push us towards curiosity and compassion. They will give us vision when we wonder whether young people will come back to church. These images will remind us that we often have all we need in the questions we ask. They help us remember that we are not meant to fix emotions but to feel them and to let them guide us towards right action.

Meet Them Where They Are

One way to apply this to our ministry context is to become students of this generation. Certainly understanding their emotions and experience will go a long way. Making space for them to process these emotions and practice lament will open up space for God to work in the uncertainty. Additionally, as we process research, like

the study from Springtide, we recognize that we must begin to assume complexity in our preaching and teaching. Are we preaching for a complicated world where a few key points can give us all we need to get on track, or are we allowing for the complexity and diversity this generation is experiencing?

Mark Sayers recently noted that “a more complex world derives from a more connected world.”¹ This generation is connected to the larger world in ever increasing ways. The research tells us that they are not only connected, but that they care. When it comes to things like “unbundling” or mistrusting institutions, young people are doing what they are doing, at least in part, because they are connected to this world and to one another. Social issues are not issues, but often people, peers, and friends.

In 1 Thessalonians 2, Paul shares a model of incarnational ministry among the people of this community. As he’s describing his ministry, we get to these words in verse 8: “So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us.” Might this verse be our verse for the moment.

A phone call can go a long way. One surprising data point in Sprintide’s Research was that 10% of young people reported that a faith leader had reached out to them during the pandemic. During a time when our buildings were closed, 1 in 10 young people report receiving contact from a faith leader.

We as the church have become dependent upon our infrastructures and programs as the means of sharing the gospel. The pandemic took that away from us, and we realized that we’ve learned how to do great ministry in the context of institutional structures, but when those are gone, we are not sure what to do. We are good at sharing our buildings, but we are not as good at sharing our lives.

As I was beginning my career as a therapist, another therapist heard me lamenting about how I might not be up for the challenge of what might come my way. In response, he shared a simple reminder: “When in doubt, be human.”

In the midst of this complex and ever changing world, we do know that relationships will always matter. In our work with young people, we can trust that God is not being outpaced by the world around us. We can trust the Holy Spirit is working in the midst of complexity. And we can practice the incarnational model of Jesus by simply being human, and being “delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own lives as well.”

There will be a time for building and growing again, but for now it might be enough to simply meet this generation in their emotions, lament our grief together in the presence of God, and learn to trust God in the middle of this complex world.

Notes

¹This is my recollection of the quote from a 2011 conference.

² <https://fulleryouthinstitute.org/blog/a-generation-of-survivors>.

³ <https://www.hhs.gov/about/news/2021/12/07/us-surgeon-general-issues-advisory-on-youth-mental-health-crisis-further-exposed-by-covid-19-pandemic.html>.

4 <https://www.aap.org/en/advocacy/child-and-adolescent-healthy-mental-development/aap-aacap-cha-declaration-of-a-national-emergency-in-child-and-adolescent-mental-health>.

5 Ambiguous loss is a loss that occurs without a significant likelihood of reaching emotional closure or a clear understanding.

6 <https://www.springtideresearch.org/research/the-state-of-religion-2021>.

7 <https://careynieuwhof.com/episode469/>.