

## **Advent Sunday 2011**

### **Teenagers: First Advent Sunday 2011**

A sermon (and skits) by Rev. Steven Epperson

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### **First Skit: the beach 85,000 years ago.**

*Epperson:* Our story today begins 85,000 years ago, on a beach in East Africa:

*Mom:* ok you two, I want you to go to the beach and gather up some shell fish for our dinner tonight. And remember, don't go wandering off!

*Teens:* OK mom. (*They walk to "the beach," and look around.*)

*1<sup>st</sup> Teen:* Man, there's nothing here! Bummer!

*2<sup>nd</sup> Teen:* Hey! Let's hike over the hill there and see if we can find some stuff. There's got to be another beach with food we can bring home.

*1<sup>st</sup> Teen:* But mom told us not to go taking off! What if we get lost or run into wild animals? We don't even have any weapons—only the men have 'em.

*2<sup>nd</sup> Teen:* Oh, c'mon! Mom doesn't know *anything*! And besides, if we can find a bunch of shell fish and bring 'em home, the grownups won't even care; in fact we'll be heroes, don't you think?

*1<sup>st</sup> Teen:* Oh, all right; I just hope we don't screw up and get into trouble.

*2<sup>nd</sup> Teen:* Listen, if we don't dare to do some crazy things sometimes, we're going to be stuck on this boring beach and this boring village in the middle of nowhere forever. (*They walk off into the vestry*)

*Epperson:* And so our two teenagers wander off into the unknown. Hours later, they return.

*2<sup>nd</sup> Teen:* The grownups are going to be so surprised! Look at all the food we're bringing back!

*1<sup>st</sup> Teen:* This is going to be awesome!

*Mom: (hopping mad)* Hey you two! Where have you been? You've been gone for hours and I've been worried sick. Boy, are the village elders going to mad!

*1<sup>st</sup> Teen:* But mom! Look at all the shell fish we found!

*Mom:* What?!

*Adult Man:* Where do you two find all this food?

*1<sup>st</sup> Teen: (Alarmed and in a loud whisper)* Don't tell him!

*2<sup>nd</sup> Teen:* We hiked over that hill (*points*); there's another beach there with lots of food just lying around.

*Adult Man:* All right. I'm going to round up some other people, and you two are going to show us the way. Let's see what we can find.

*(Teens very excited; to each other)* Yeah! Way cool!

*Mom:* Wait a minute! Aren't they going to get in trouble?

*Adult Man:* We'll talk about this later. OK you two: show us where you went...

*(They walk off)*

The scenario you have just seen is not as far-fetched as it may seem; indeed, something like this may well have happened tens of thousands of years ago when the earliest human families were poised on the shores of Eastern Africa to begin the epic migrations that resulted in the settling of the earth by our species. What the start of those journeys out of Africa absolutely needed was trail blazers—the kind of people who were willing to go over the forbidden horizon “*out there*” in search of more food, and thus drawing us into new ecological niches. But the first steps on that journey...it took restless, playful trailblazers full of boundless curiosity and restless energy willing to take risks, to buck parental authority, to break out of conventional thought, belief and behaviours: the kind of people who are full of a gnawing, unformed and passionate

desire to leave home and make their own way in the world. Sound familiar? Do you know any group of human beings who fit that description; who play that role right down to the present? Today, I am proposing that the advent and future of the human story—its journeying forth, its growing to full adulthood, its to-be-hoped-for wising up—absolutely depends on that magnificent, risk-taking, mood swinging, gawky, opened minded, restlessly energetic, and inspiring class of homo sapiens called TEENAGERS! It’s teenagers who are putting the “ADVENT-ure” into this first Advent Sunday of our holiday season. (for our primal scene above, see Michele Pridmore-Brown, “Surges,” a review of *The Evolution of Childhood*, by Melvin Konner, in *Times Literary Supplement*, 1 October 2010. BTW: it’s a great article!)

Now some may say, wait a minute Epperson; teenagers are a recent invention, a socially constructed phase of human life. In a word, before the 18<sup>th</sup>/19<sup>th</sup> centuries, “teenagers” didn’t even exist. In the past and in certain traditional cultures today, a person is a child and then, *bang!* almost the next day she is an adult, with an adult body and responsibilities. I admit that our *attitudes* of what it *means* to be a teen, and the subjective experience of being a teen have most definitely changed. No question.

Nevertheless, what takes place for all of us in the years stretching roughly from 12-20 is clearly a unique phase in the developmental process of human beings. It’s a phase in the life of each individual whose origins go back to our advent as a distinct species of primates and whose distinctive features are clearly woven through the fabric of human life from pre-history to the present. Indeed, “evolution created teenagers because they are the best way [for us] to become adults.” (Bainbridge, see below) People who study the natural history of human beings underline not only our similarities with other animals, but our uniqueness—there’s nothing in the animal world quite like us. For example, other animals catapult from childhood to adulthood without passing through the unusually long period of dependence, growth, development, and experimentation

that is characteristic of our teen years. As well, and this is crucial, according to neurologists—people who study the growth and features of our brains—“the teen brain is different than the adult brain...and we ignore those differences to our peril.” (Jay Giedd, quoted in Underwood, see below)

As we well know, and as teens can attest emphatically, their unique decade is a bewildering, exciting mash-up of growth spurts, new and alarming hair, acne and empathy, peer pressure and harsh judgment, independence *and* drawn out dependence, smelliness, responsibility, sex and self-control, uncertain, fluid relationships, self-definition and discovery all overlapping each other helter-skelter. (see David Bainbridge, *Teenagers: A Natural History*, 2009, Nora Underwood, “The Teenage Brain...,” *The Walrus*, October 28, 2011. Hereafter *Walrus*.)

Consider the following:

### **Second Skit: waking up moody on a Saturday afternoon**

*Epperson*: It’s a beautiful Saturday afternoon in a neighbourhood just down the road; in fact, it may be your neighbourhood! If truth be told, what you’re about to see may have taken place yesterday in your own home! You know who I’m talking to....

*Parent*: Are you *still* in bed?! (*Teen groans and roles over*) Young lady/man: it’s Saturday and 1:00 in the afternoon! I go off to do some errands, and look at you just lying around!

*Teen*: But Mom/Dad...!

*Parent*: Don’t you Mom/Dad me! You have chores to do! And look at this bedroom! It’s a mess!

*Teen*: (*struggles to sit up. imploring*) Can’t you see I’m tired!

*Parent*: Well you can’t just sleep there all afternoon!

*Teen: (pretty ticked off at this point) You don't understand ANYTHING! You don't know anything about me! Just leave me alone will you?! (collapses back down and pulls blanket over head)*

*Parent: Oh, I just give up! (leaves)*

*Teen: Good grief! (pauses, thinking of something else all together) Why was I such an **idiot** last night at that party! Trying to impress everyone! I just made a fool of myself. No will like me anymore! They're going to hate me! My hair's a mess; my face is a disaster area! I am SO MISERABLE!*

*Parent: (exasperated) Someone's on the phone for you...*

*Teen: (throws the blanket aside, jumping up) WHO IS IT?*

*Parent: I don't know; one of your friends... (teen grabs the phone)*

*Parent: (looking at teen in disbelief) DON'T TELL ME YOU SLEPT IN YOUR CLOTHES!*

*Teen: (on the phone, ignoring the parental unit; excited—totally different mood/person) A party...tonight? Where? Mom/Dad can I go over to \_\_\_\_'s tonight? It's going to be the most amazing party!.... (Freeze: teen all excited; parent—disbelief/exasperation)*

What you have just seen is not from the twilight zone; it's fairly realistic. And yes, I admit that it presents a number of stereotypes. But as Marian Strok, the principal of Evergreen Academy Middle School in Chicago said on a recent radio broadcast that focused on adolescent years, "all the stereotypes are true...it's the way we react to them that make all the difference."

(from "Middle School," This American Life, 10/28/11.)

Let's look at some of these stereotypes in our domestic, intergenerational scenario:

***Sleep.*** Let's start with sleep. The child who once woke you up before sunrise when you were desperate for sleep, now has to be dragged from bed in the morning, wants to sleep well

into the afternoon, and can't be forced to bed at night. Making matters worse, the changing sleep patterns of teens also happens as the sleep needs of middle-aged parents are flipping around the other way. It's not passive aggressive behaviour on their part, "it's biology—the circadian rhythms of the teen brain has changed.... And if they appear to be cycling through the day at a different pace from the rest of the world, it's because they are." (Walrus)

And because we're forcing them to conform to our clock, they're chronically sleep-deprived. They go to school tired, unfocused, and typically unfed," which makes them "less able to absorb information in the morning." Overtime, the consequences are compounded; they may be forgetting 20-30% of what's being taught them, and this can go on for months. "It's an [incredibly] inefficient system." As well, increasingly it is clear that sleep deprivation can have negative effects on a person's mental and emotional well-being. Getting the right amount of sleep—and teens need about nine hours in a 24 hour cycle—should be a priority in our homes. It's not easy to fight nature. Perhaps the best we can do is to stay flexible and patient, to encourage a tapering off of activity at a reasonable time in the evening, keep technology out of the bedroom, cut down on the caffeine in the evening, and let kids catch up on sleep in the weekends. (Walrus) Remember: "the stereotypes are true...it's the way we react to them that make all the difference."

***Moods, miscues, and the developing brain.*** We know that the choreography of emotions and relationships between teens, and between adults and teenagers can be complicated. As one teen put it: "It wasn't this hard in elementary school. Back then, you could just walk up to someone and say, do you want to be my friend? And that would be it. But in middle school, it's harder; people are more wary and slower to open up. In middle school, you have to put up with all this emotional drama." (from "Middle School," This American Life.)

Slammed doors, bewilderment, enthusiasms picked up and dropped on a dime, sulks, ecstasies, affection, and hostility. It can feel, and look like a roller coaster. But as the comedian Stephen Merchant says: “I should make it clear to you that no one chooses to be a [teenager]. I didn’t suddenly decide to grow lank, greasy hair, wear bad-fitting clothes and want to look like I have a dead body in the cellar.” (from “The Awkward Years,” *Guardian*, 08/11,11) We have to remember that extraordinary things, massive changes are taking place in the teen brain; and that this is nature’s inexorable, cunning, some might say nasty, way for us to become adults.

Brain research over the past two decades, involving MRI scans of nearly 2000 young people, has given us unprecedented insights into the working and development of teen brains. It’s an amazing picture. Hormones, like testosterone and estradiol kick in, triggering the biggest growth spurt and body shape-shifting since we were infants and toddlers. Teens can’t sit still, because their bones are growing faster than our muscles. They read emotions and visual cues in ways nearly alien to adults—because that information is being processed differently; it’s taking place primarily in the emotional, gut response region deep within brain. It’s a time of impulsive, more spontaneous behaviour and fluctuating emotions. Teens experience different emotional weather than grown-ups; they’re more at the mercy of their feelings—especially the anxiety of being accepted or rejected by their peers, consumed about where they fit into the social order when they have so many things to figure out, including how to deal *with us*.

In adults, more and more of that kind of work gets taken over by the prefrontal cortex, the “frontal lobe”—that portion of the brain dedicated to processing and controlling emotions, to organizing, planning, and strategizing more “rationally” how we’re going to act and be in the world. It’s also the part of the brain that allows us to philosophize and think about our place in the universe. All of this is on the move and “under construction” in teenagers. It’s a category

mistake on our part to assume teens can read adult emotions and understand everything adults say: including “Put your clothes away.” “Pleased get dressed now.” “No, you can’t go to parties two nights in a row.” And you get this vacant or hostile reaction. It’s not that a teenager is necessarily being difficult or confrontational, not trying to frustrate you by not “getting it.” The emotion, the information, may just have not registered, or it’s been reorganized, and thus seen in a different light with a different sense of urgency.

*One more thing about the teen brain: “arborization.”* At the threshold of adolescence, the brain produces way more grey matter cells (on the surface of the brain) than can possibly survive. It’s like a tree over laden with excess branches, crowded and bushy with leaves and twigs; we end up with is far more cells and connections than we need or could use. But the evolutionary point of all this growth may be to prepare teenagers for the challenges of entering the next stage of life. With all this grey matter and neural development, “there’s enormous potential,” says the neurologist Jay Giedd. “People can take many different life directions. But launching out into puberty, young people start specializing; they start deciding”: this is what I’m good at; this I can’t do, what about this? This is me! “All the life choices, even though they are still there, start getting cut back, and we focus in on what makes us unique and special.”

All the while through these years, the teen mind is whittling away at that excess growth; the grey matter is pruned back; and the white matter beneath, which enables neural communication between cells, increases and focuses. Specializing, focusing, whittling, pruning—while this crucial stage of brain development is taking place *inside* the teen brain, what we see on the *outside* is *experimentation*: the trying on different roles, behaviours, disciplines, and identities—goth, nerd, jock, ladies man, musician, party animal, religious zealot, politician....It’s a time when we open up to the world and its myriad possibilities; when we

really start thinking and feeling about bigger things, and we haven't formed cast-iron opinions yet—everything's up for grabs. It's amazing to be around, to behold, suffer through and with, and to marvel at! Do you remember those years: parties, friends, work, school, sports, proms, mad crushes, helpless hoping—the agonies and ecstasies of constructing an adult, enduring self?

Let's end where we began, on a beach tens of thousands of years ago, and the risky behaviour of two energetic teens filled with curiosity and daring. By going over the hill and finding food further up the coast, they helped set into motion the epic migration of humanity out into world. What may have been true in the big world and the distant past—the human journey through time and space spurred on by teenagers—is true as well on a far smaller scale inside each individual, youthful brain from that remote time right down to the present and to this very room. The mind is in motion; it's on a journey all of us take in our teen years, where the heavy lifting of thoughtful emotion, of affective intelligence migrates from its primitive, limbic reptilian home deep within the brain forward and up into the loft of the forecourts of the mind.

Our teenage years---they can be an ordeal; I know. It can also be a wonderful, valuable time of “chaotic unpredictability that can lift a teenager to a higher, more intense, and unforgettable level of experience than any other phase of life” (Bainbridge); a time in the life of our young people that calls on us as adults—even when they shrink away from affection, when they grunt, slam doors, blast music and seem incapable of following even simple instructions—that calls on grownups to be patient, understanding, and to walk alongside and lead by example in things great and small.

*The true measure of a nation's standing is how well it attends to its children – their health and safety, their material security, their education and socialization, and their sense of being loved, valued, and included in the families and societies into which they are born. Unicef*

