

“The Emotive Alphabet Of Youth”  
*Emerging Youth Cultures*  
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There's an American novel, *A Tree Grows In Brooklyn*, written in 1943 by Betty Smith. The story centers on the character of Francie Nolan, a very bright young girl living in a Brooklyn tenement in New York, at the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Francie Nolan is the daughter of poor immigrants. Her intelligence gives her the means to cope with a very difficult life and a kind father overwhelmed by alcoholism. Her story is one of success. At one point in the novel, 11 year-old Francie, an avid reader, observes the use of profanities and vulgar language by people in her neighborhood. She reasons that their use of such terms must be due to the fact that they have a limited vocabulary and lack the words to express articulately their thoughts, emotions, and experiences.

As I began to prepare for the topic of my talk today, "The emotive alphabet of youth," I was somewhat overwhelmed. On the one hand, we have no shortage of data that indicates the dire state of almost every demographic in our society. On the other hand, one has barely to scratch the surface to find stories, particularly of young people, who are thriving in every personal aspect of their lives, including the emotional and spiritual. Despite the breakdown of the family, various societal failings, and the apparent lack of emotional intelligence, it is possible to thrive in our various cultures...assuming one has the tools. And I couldn't help but think of 11 year-old Francie's observation that people are trapped in the limited world of vulgarities when they lack the vocabulary to articulate their experiences, when they are limited in the human expression of their existence.

The Pontifical Council for Culture proposed the term "emotive alphabet." At first I was confused. In English, there is much discussion of "emotional

intelligence” and “emotional literacy,” but not of an “emotive alphabet.” After conversation and reflection, it was clear that the Council was in fact proposing a new and positive concept. Rather than overwhelm ourselves with statistics from dismal data, why not have a constructive conversation not only about how to reach youth, but how to prepare and arm them for successful lives? For several decades now, experts, most notably psychologist Daniel Goleman, have realized that the traditional means of measuring intelligence and determining an individual’s success, namely intelligence quotient or IQ, fell short. Study after study showed that people with high IQs were not necessarily the most successful in life. At the same time, very successful and satisfied people did not always have the highest IQs. Goleman and others maintain that the missing component of the research is *emotional intelligence* [EI], the ability to relate with and understand others. EI goes beyond one’s genetics and takes into account the surrounding culture, starting with the family, in which an individual is raised. As Goleman notes:

The ability to control impulse is the base of will and character. By the same token, the root of altruism lies in empathy, the ability to read emotions in others; lacking of sense of another’s need or despair, there is no caring. And if there are any two moral stances that our times call for, they are precisely these, self restraint and compassion.<sup>1</sup>

Emotional intelligence, in other words, relates to a fundamental human capacity in the person: the ability to exist with others and oneself.

Neuroscience and psychology now identifies two “minds”: the feeling mind, which we experience first, if unconsciously, and the thinking mind which is evolved and we experience secondarily although apparently primarily. In his

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<sup>1</sup>Goleman, Daniel, *Emotional Intelligence: 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition*.

foundational book *Emotional Intelligence*, Goleman cites the work of psychologists Peter Salovey and John Mayer who identified five components included in the definition of EI:

1. Knowing one's emotions: recognizing a feeling as it happens.
2. Managing emotions: handling feelings so they are appropriate.
3. Motivating oneself: emotional self-control, i.e. delaying gratification and stifling impulsiveness, which are necessary for any type of accomplishment.
4. Recognizing emotion in others: people skills.
5. Handling relationships: skill in managing emotions in others.

Although I speak from an American perspective, I do not think that I am describing a uniquely American experience. Every one of us can think of particular situations of youth in crisis, whether the recent massacre conducted by 20 year-old Adam Lanza in Newtown, Connecticut, which ended only after killing more than twenty other individuals and himself, or the dysfunctional lonely twenty-something who lives next door or even in our own home. We can discuss issues like gun control, mental health, and youth initiatives ad nauseam. But we must realize that fundamentally the challenge lies in addressing the inability to be in relation, to exist comfortably with oneself (imperfections and all) and with others (including their imperfections). Like the poor people whom Francie observed using vulgar language, the demographic that manifests such dire social outcomes lacks the basic language, or even the alphabet to participate in the language that is uniquely human: the language of relation.

In my brief overview, I'd like to suggest first a rereading of the situation, looking at it through another lens. Instead of simply focusing on negative social indicators, let us look more closely at them to see if perhaps they don't reveal something deeper about the human person. If we can begin to understand the

actions, we can develop better solutions. The second step will be to consider the origins of the problem. After all, the current generation of youth did not come to be simply of their own accord. The third step for today will be to examine some practical solutions.

St. Thomas Aquinas, when discussing sin, notes that we always choose an apparent good. It may not be an actual good or it may be incomparable to a greater good, but we nonetheless choose an action or behavior that we find good in some way. Part of the process of stopping sinful behavior is to realize and truly desire an authentic good. When we look at negative behavior indicators, we can focus on the outcome or we can also look at the motivation and what the outcome expresses about the individual.

It is no secret that in terms of social media, people of all ages are more “connected” than ever. However, particularly in the developed countries, every demographic is experiencing higher rates of depression than previously recorded in human history. We have more material goods and opportunities than any population before. Sure, we can discuss how it’s harder to find a job now rather than in another recent period of time, but it’s all relative as evidenced by the modern definitions of poverty. Very few people in the developed countries ever come close to experiencing poverty as it is known in the developing countries. In fact, by comparison, poverty can sometimes look like wealth. Yet, the rates of depression and general dissatisfaction continue to rise. Perhaps it’s because we are not as connected as our virtual world suggests. 3,000 or 300 or even 30 friends on FaceBook don’t compare to one or two good friends in our actual lives, or a supportive family, who are there when we need them and who actually understand us. Yet, the immense popularity of social media suggests a

very real desire to connect with others, particularly when we lack the real life connections which the virtual mimic.

Similarly, we can discuss the extremely high rates of extra marital sexual activity among teens and young adults (or, if this were another conference, among adults in general and senior citizens). But we ultimately need to look at what we can learn from these indicators. Again, I would suggest that it's a desire, motivated by strong passions, to attempt to connect with another human being. People don't feel depressed and ashamed by extra marital sexual encounters because the quality or quantity of the sexual activity was somehow lacking. It's because they were, at least innately, seeking something both more profound and more basic. Yet, after the experience, there can be the overwhelming reality that what was sought completely eluded the individual.

Last year, I was asked to speak at a panel on the Catholic Church's teachings on sex and marriage at a Catholic university. Rather than beginning with a moralizing sermon, I started with a discussion of Catholic theology, our understanding of the relations in the Trinity which are expressions of love at its fullest, and our participation in them both by virtue of our creation in the image and likeness of God and through divine filiation. Some might say that my approach was too lofty, but I was attempting to make real their desire for love, to give it an alphabet or a vocabulary so that they might be able to express themselves more fully. It was a very secular environment and, unfortunately, public discussion was not allowed. Instead, we broke out into small groups after the very summary event. Ideally, one would have more time to explore the Church's teachings. Yet, even in that brief encounter, some of the students were intrigued by the concept of love. Sex was a given. But love eluded them. Despite

the physical expressions of love, there was something missing. Recently, secular publications such as *The Atlantic Monthly* and *The New York Times* have published articles on the demise of dating and courtship despite (or perhaps because of) high levels of sexual activity. There's no mistaking the dissatisfaction experienced, particularly by young women. Engaging in sex hasn't brought about the love and connection that they desire. They are motivated by good things but lack the means and the language to achieve their desired ends. It's like they've been given a faulty GPS that leads them far astray from their desired destination. They wanted a honeymoon in California paradise, but they woke up in a fleabag hotel in Las Vegas with someone who holds no appeal whatsoever in the bright daylight.

Addictions are on the rise as well, both in number and in kind. We can look at limiting the addictive behaviors or substances, or we can look at the root causes and basic desires. After all, an addict denied one addiction can simply find another. Much of the current literature on addiction reveals that addiction masks a deep wound, not infrequently related to family of origin. I've yet to learn of or to know an addict who wanted to be an addict. It's not a goal that anyone chooses. Every form of addiction has an element of escape, typically from a painful reality. If we start there, understanding the desires and experience of the addict, we might be able to help the individual. In fact, such an approach accounts for the success of 12-step programs around the world. When people are given the tools to understand and relate to themselves as well as others, the apparent need for the addiction begins to dissolve. Unfortunately, that doesn't undo the often permanent changes to the brain; but it does afford a way out of the addiction and, ultimately, into healthier relationships with self and others.

I've briefly touched upon the negative social indicators of depression, increased extra marital sexual activity, and addiction. We could enumerate many others. But a pattern emerges: the inability to relate or the lack of emotional intelligence.

Another psychologist, Jean M. Twenge, identifies the current generation of youth as Generation Me in her book of the same name. In fact, the identity spans a little more than one generation, including any individual born after the self-focus of the baby boomers entered our mainstream awareness. Twenge maintains, and I agree, that people born [in the US and other developed countries] in the 1970s, 80s, 90s were born into a culture in which self esteem was prized. She writes, "GenMe is not self-absorbed; we're self important. We take it for granted that we're independent, special individuals, so we don't really need to think about it." She's careful to note that we're not a selfish generation. We're a generation that wants to do things our own way. In the past, it might have been considered selfish to take a new job in a city far from one's family. Our generation, she observes, does not see this as selfish; but simply putting the individual first, as we were taught so well by the preceding generation of boomers. We have been raised on a diet of self esteem and choosing our own happiness, whatever we think that may be. However, Twenge is quick to point out, "[O]ur high expectations combined with an increasingly competitive world, have led to a darker flip side, where we blame other people for our problems and sink into anxiety and depression." Whereas baby boomers were group oriented and preceding generations were family oriented, the current generation has been taught "the primacy of the individual at virtually every step." "[It is] a culture that was firmly in place before they [we] were born."

She links the increasing focus on the self with the radical change in sexual behavior among youth. Parents no longer worry about their high school students have sex but also their middle-schoolers and even elementary age children. The focus on the self has also affected our education system: students feel that they are equal to their teachers in authority and understanding, which therefor tends to thwart the whole educational process. Ultimately, there is no trust, which Twenge argues suggests a culture growing towards disconnection and a move away from close communities, bringing us full circle to the conditions that give rise to the situations where Goleman identifies low emotional intelligence. Twenge's research implicitly, if not explicitly, demonstrates the move from community to the individual. In other words, the crisis facing the youth culture is one of relation.

In this last part of my talk, I want to look at some of the practical considerations and solutions. I speak from my own experience as a member of Generation Me and as a moral theologian who surveys culture and its movement. I grew up in a Catholic family, went to a Catholic school for part of my education and was closely involved in catechism and youth group classes. My book preparing me for First Communion had almost no mention of the sacrament. It was filled with butterflies and flowers. My parents separated when I was about ten. They subsequently divorced. I did not stop going to Mass or even rudimentary prayer. Nevertheless, by the time I graduated from high school I was of the opinion that God exists but that there was no place for organized religion. Then I went to college, an authentic Catholic college which engaged both my intellect and my heart. Most of the students received spiritual direction even though we had no idea what it was when we first arrived. As my faith grew in

understanding, I found myself furious at my parents and at the Catholic Church. I felt as if I'd been cheated out of something that I was owed. I was angry. Rightly so, I still maintain. But I was fortunate in countless ways.

The reality is that the family has disintegrated at an appalling rate since the introduction of no-fault divorce in the 1970s. There is no denying that this has correlated with negative social outcomes including the increasing number of incomplete families as evidenced by a rate of birth (in the US) for single mothers of 40 percent, and widespread divorce and remarriage. One of the most primary messages that children of divorce take in is that no one cares enough for them, they are not all that important. After all, especially in the case of no-fault divorce, the primary goal is the apparent happiness of the parents, not the children.

In addition, most of our Catholic schools have not had much success at helping the students to develop integrally so that they can be fully successful Catholic adults rather than part of a statistic of negative outcomes. I firmly believe that we need to strengthen and rebuild families, but for the young adults living now, a more immediate intervention or triage is required. They will form the next generation of families. While they may not be able to get the tools and experiences that they need from their own families, they can get them from other sources.

As I prepared for this talk, I spent time listening to those Catholics who work with youth on a daily basis, encountering them in their actual situations and helping them to grow both as individuals and as children of God. Regardless of the negative social indicators encountered by teens and young adults, their natural desire for intimacy and relation can lead them to a profound and vibrant faith. Most of these programs are not well funded and not necessarily well

known on a national or international level. They are local, not global. And they all take time. I found that every successful project had three things in common: they build personal relationships between local leaders and youth, they introduce the concept of personal prayer (as opposed to no prayer or rote recitation of memorized prayers), and they involve ongoing catechesis. In contrast to the alternative experienced in the culture at large, youth are not encouraged in a radical and unrealistic individualism. They are challenged with teachings that may be difficult, but which prove formative. After all, these individuals are smarter and tougher than many give them credit. They may have grown up with parents and teachers who thought they were too fragile to accept a reality in which they didn't all win first place and where they were not held to high standards set by authoritative entities greater than themselves. But they are capable of great things and great challenges, even those which the previous generation thought were too demanding.

I have visited many secular universities where it's easy to find students at their worst. But you can also find students at their best. In some cases, Catholic students and Evangelical Protestant students have formed their own networks of support, not infrequently based on common social values like sexual integrity. In other cases, there are specific Catholic projects affiliated with the Newman Centers, the Dominican Order of priests, Opus Dei priests, and the Fellowship Of Catholic University Students (FOCUS). To be sure, there are other ministries and missionaries, but these are some of the primary. I've yet to encounter one that has a hyper structured program. In many ways, they work like microcosms of healthy parishes. They start by being a constant presence. They meet students where they are, they are reliable and they are welcoming. Frequently they

sponsor activities which foster friendship and camaraderie. But moving beyond the flower-and-butterfly-everybody-feel-good-catechesis that they may have experienced before, if they were given any formation, they are challenged with the real and actual teachings of the Church. They may resist them, but they are respected enough to be given even the opportunity to wrestle with and even reject them. As people begin to experience relationships on a natural level, it becomes possible for them to consider relationship on a supernatural level. Every successful program that I have encountered offers a serious prayer component. Typically, it's an invitation to begin to explore the spiritual life, not in an abstract and academic way; but actually spending time talking with and listening to Jesus Christ in what can only be called the depths of the human heart. Not infrequently, it takes place before the Blessed Sacrament. The results can be seen in every healthy clerical, religious, or married vocation, not to mention in the healthy individuals who are able to function as relational members of society rather than the individualistic selves raised by the previous generation. They begin to do the work of faith seeking understanding, the work that every individual is called to do for a lifetime.

From my perspective, this is the New Evangelization: using new means, not so much technological tools but new types of communities to address new (often grave) situations. The message, however, is the same as the human nature that desires it. It is the same message that Christ himself brought, answering the same profound human desires. These new communities aren't just something for the fragmented situations in the developed countries but also for the developing countries, particularly where there are so many young people growing up without parents and family, especially due to the effects of HIV/AIDS. And, as

countries develop, they not infrequently follow both the positive and negative examples of the developed countries.

Regardless of time and place, human nature remains the same. Hence, the emotive alphabet of youth is not something new, but something constant. It is the desire, need for, and expression of relation and intimacy. Even if they lack the vocabulary, they have the basic alphabet. Traditionally, it was the family helped the child to put the letters together to build a language. Now we must find ways to help build that vocabulary and fill the gap created by the shortcomings of the family by building small communities that make a global world real, concrete and local. This doesn't happen just at university but also at the parish level, in communities started by the diverse and authentic movements, and even in thriving catechesis programs like the Montessori Catechesis of the Good Shepherd. There are a multitude of successful programs or solutions but they all have these three things in common: they start with interpersonal relationships, they offer solid catechesis, and teach a life centered on prayer, regardless of one's state in life.

While the negative social indicators may be overwhelming at times, I think there's great reason for hope. We have solutions which are being utilized already. We just need to do more of the same.

In conclusion, I would like to refer to two separate instances from this past December. In the UK, a study was conducted of 2,000-3,000 children, asking them what they wanted for Christmas. Their number one request was a sibling. Further down the list, they asked for iPads and reindeer. But their number ten request was a father. And number twenty-three was a mother. At the same time, Pope Benedict offered a reflection on the Holy Family and asked whether we

would recognize them were they to knock on our doors. While these children surveyed may not all be writing the type of Christmas letter that the Pope wrote when he was a boy of seven, I find at least three of their requests to be profound and a hopeful indication that their hearts are very generous. Without wanting to suggest that children cast off all their lessons on stranger danger, I think they would open their doors to Mary and Joseph. They'd know a family when they saw it. It is this innate understanding that makes it possible to extract an emotive alphabet on which to build the human language of relation, belonging, and intimacy.