Life is Change
"My Adolescent State of Mind"

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Abstract: Using a variety of literature, theories, and concepts in the sociology of youth and adolescence, in this paper I reflect back on my own "adolescent state of mind" to draw needed lessons for my further growth as a person. Adolescence is a very important time for growth and exploration. Cote and Allahar state that "[t]he average person looks upon adolescence as a natural and necessary stage of development and feels that this period is the time of one's life when one is carefree and has no responsibilities" (107). However, since an adolescent suddenly moves beyond the certainties of childhood and is suddenly exposed to many different perspectives, certain experiences can become incredibly overwhelming and difficult. In thinking back to my adolescence, I wish I was more open-minded when my father and I moved to Florida. I spent a good portion of my adolescence trying to prove a point instead of enjoying my life and my freedom. Leaving my father was the first time I experienced a broken heart and I will never forget how much that affected my identity development. Many days I was unsure of who I was without him because he was my provider and caretaker. In conclusion, my decision to leave him and move back to Massachusetts made me a stronger person. I learned the concept of responsibility and independence which are two very important qualities when entering adulthood.

Adolescence is a very important time for growth and exploration. Cote and Allahar state that "[t]he average person looks upon adolescence as a natural and necessary stage of development and feels that this period is the time of one's life when one is carefree and has no responsibilities" (107). However, since an adolescent suddenly moves beyond the certainties of childhood and is suddenly exposed to many different perspectives, certain experiences can become incredibly overwhelming and difficult.

My father raised me because my parents were never married. I was born when they were teenagers and my father happened to be the more responsible one of the two. When I was fifteen years old, my father decided to move from Springfield, Massachusetts, to St. Petersburg, Florida, the summer before my junior year of high school. He told me it would be an experience of a lifetime so I tried to look at our move as an adventure instead of an obligation. In many ways, I was frightened of this drastic change, primarily because I was

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leaving behind the only life I knew including my mother, my younger sister, and *all* of my friends. The feeling was so powerful and overwhelming that it is indescribable.

Erik Erikson believed that "**adolescence** is the period in the human life cycle during which the individual must establish a sense of personal identity and avoid the dangers of role diffusion and identity confusion" (Muuss: 51). In order for individuals to develop stable identities, they must be able to understand themselves. As Erikson describes, "**identity** must be acquired through sustained individual effort. Unwillingness to work actively on one's identity formation carries with it the danger of **role diffusion**, which may result in alienation and a sense of isolation and confusion" (Muuss: 51).

In understanding the process of identity development, I feel as though my identity formation was delayed as I began to lose myself during the moving process. Once we left Massachusetts, I felt very lost and insecure in my surroundings. I felt as though I was alone in Florida and unable to identify with anyone socially. I could not maintain what Erik Erikson calls **psychosocial reciprocity**, because nobody seemed to empathize with my recent experience.

Erik Erikson considered the idea of adolescence as a Moratorium. **Identity moratorium**, as described by Cote & Allahar, "can provide young people with opportunities to experiment with roles, ideas, beliefs, and life-styles and can set them on a life course that is rich and rewarding" (74). In understanding this adolescent process, I feel as though I never experienced such an important stage of identity development until much later in life. As everything about my identity seemed unknown to me at that time, I only found myself experimenting with *ideas* and *beliefs* of happiness because I did not know how to express myself through my current state of mind. I just wanted to be happy and feel like a teenager again, instead of a lost soul in a new state.

Cote and Allahar also write, "From Erikson's perspective, these identity moratoria should function to lessen the trauma of the identity transformation experience during the coming-of-age period" (74). As I was experiencing my own form of psychological trauma, I did not have the opportunity to lessen the trauma of identity transformation. At the time of the move, I was not experiencing identity transformation because I was trying to understand and relate to my new identity in Florida. Once I moved, I was a stranger to myself and in many ways I felt as though I had left my identity in Massachusetts.

As my time in Florida progressed, I felt worse. However, I tried to look on the bright side of the situation. I was looking forward to the first day of school because it was my chance to meet new people and focus on my school work instead of my sadness. "A sense of rolelessness in current society is one of the most common dilemmas of adolescents. This is particularly problematic given fundamental needs among youth to find a sense of belonging and to feel a sense of worth as a person" (Herr: 48). My lack of self-worth led to much bigger problems than feeling alone. Unfortunately at this point, I was so emotionally traumatized from my sadness that I stopped eating regularly. Eating became a chore and within three weeks of not eating properly I lost about fifteen pounds, which was a lot for me at the time. As my first day of school approached, I weighed about ninety-two pounds. I had always been on the smaller side, but from my clothing and how it fit my body I noticed that I lost a lot of weight.

On the first day of school I felt very out of place. For the first time in my life I knew what it felt like to be the minority. My school was primarily black, which was not an issue to me but I felt like an outcast with my pale skin and undernourished slender figure. It was apparent at lunch time that there was a lack of racial diversity within

the high school community. The few white students were always together, while the black students had their own social group. There was very little racial integration, and the only form of integration that I witnessed was in the classroom when certain groups were assigned to work with one another.

Beverly Daniel Tatum writes, "The search for personal identity that intensifies in adolescence can involve several dimensions of an adolescent's life …. The process of exploration may vary across these identity domains" (53). At my school in Florida, I could sense that the black students felt a stronger connection with one another while they were experiencing their identity formation process. I did not care if all of my friends were black, white, or Asian—I just wanted to feel a connection with some kind of peer group so I could start to find myself again. A **peer group** is "an association of self-selected equals who coalesce around common interests, tastes, preferences, and beliefs" (Bensman & Rosenberg: 80). In many ways, adolescents form peer groups to create a sense of belonging with other youths. I was in desperate need of friendship and acceptance at this school and for some reason it was impossible for me to meet the need.

Proveda writes, "Relationships with other adolescents are the major influences in adolescent identity development" (42). My constant need to connect with my peers and maintain psychosocial reciprocity is not limited to a peer group. Adolescence is "a period of a great need for peer group recognition and almost compulsive peer group involvement" (Muuss: 52). My constant need to find a peer group was reflective of my efforts in developing a new identity in Florida. While I was not interacting with other adolescents on a social level, I was not experiencing any positive aspects throughout this process of my identity development. I began to lose faith in forming new adolescent relationships. Alas, these

high school students did not seem very open to new students and I did not have the energy to try to fit into that social environment.

A few weeks into the school year, I wore a pair of gaucho pants that tied in front with a cream colored top that fell as a midriff. In the middle of my day, I was walking to science class and two black girls stopped in the hallway, looked at me and said, "She is so disgusting, she is anorexic." I ran to the bathroom and cried for the rest of the afternoon. I did not know if they were verbally attacking me because of my appearance, or because of the fact that I was white. Either way, I constantly felt out of place and unwelcome.

In many ways, that day was a turning point in my moving experience. I became negative and refused to build my life in Florida. I started eating regularly as I quickly became unsatisfied with my appearance. I was addicted to peanut M&M's and started eating them by the pound because they made me feel happy. After three months I managed to gain twenty pounds. I looked great; but my father could tell that I was emotionally unstable and he began to worry since I was not adjusting well to my life in Florida. After a very long conversation, my father gave me the opportunity to move back to Massachusetts and live with my mother. Two weeks later, my father drove me back to Massachusetts.

Throughout my drive back to Massachusetts, I feared the consequences of my decision to leave my father. I wondered if my home was ultimately with my father because he had always been my provider. Alas, I felt the need to spread my wings to obtain a feeling of independence and individualism in regard to finding myself again. **Individualism** is defined as "an encouragement to be yourself, develop your own talent, and try your best" (Sawyer: 196). In my current state of mind, I wanted to simply feel like myself and learn the importance of independence as I never felt I

understood the concept of independence while growing up with my father. In regard to the genital stage of development, "Freud said that from puberty onward the individual's great task is 'freeing himself from the parents.' … [F]or the daughter, the tasks are the same, she too must separate from the parents and establish a life of her own" (Crain: 258). My father was my caretaker, and I never had anything to worry about when I lived with him. I always felt a sense of security, but in the back of my mind I always feared that I would be dependent on him throughout my life if I did not leave him and go back to Massachusetts.

While part of me was excited for my new adventure, I had a lot of doubt in the back of my mind. I never had a close relationship with my mother for a number of different reasons. Throughout my childhood, she proved herself to be a very irresponsible and confrontational individual; I was not raised to be that way with my father. I was raised in a very peaceful and loving environment which is something my mother had never experienced in her lifetime. When I moved back from Florida, my mother was residing in Chicopee, Massachusetts, in a one bedroom apartment with my five year old sister, Elana. All three of us shared a one bedroom apartment because that was all my mother could afford at the time. We had very little privacy from one another which made our living situation very difficult at times. Most days I felt an incredible amount of regret for the decision I had made, but I promised myself I would make the best of the situation because I was back home in Massachusetts where I wanted to be.

Once again, I had to start fresh at another new school. This was my second high school in three months. Overall, it was the fourth high school I had attended during my high school career. At some point, I began to doubt the idea of stability as I had not experienced *any* kind of stability in months. As a junior in high school, I always

imagined myself having many friends and feeling a sense of acceptance amongst my peers. Unfortunately, I found myself in my junior year of high school entering another new school without a single friend in the hallway. The first two weeks of school, I ate my lunch in front of my locker while pretending to read a book. The cafeteria was too overwhelming for me and I was more comfortable by myself as I was trying to maintain a positive frame of mind.

As weeks passed, I was still eating lunch alone in front of my locker. I felt insecure about myself and I began analyzing all of my thoughts and feelings because I did not have anyone to talk to. Crain writes that "[o]ur thoughts and feelings can be as important as actual events" (247). I started to wonder if I was meant to spend my life alone because this was the first time in my life that I actually felt any kind of permanent sadness and loneliness. Regardless of my positive thoughts, I found it more difficult to get out of bed in the morning. Many days I would go to school for two hours and leave because I could not bear the idea of eating alone in front of my locker. Luckily, I was able to find a deli down the street from my school. I bought a journal and started to write down all of my thoughts and feelings. It was helpful as I found myself engaging with a lot of my problems.

Chicopee High school, as an educational institution, was a very welcoming environment for individuals who had the potential to feel out of place in life. For example, the majority of students were white but there was a racial/ethnic diversity of groups which I had not witnessed in Florida. In regard to the concept of institutional violence toward students that represent a minority, such as gay and lesbian students, I did not see any violence related to institutional practices or socio-cultural beliefs and values. The act of **violence** is defined as "any act or situation in which a person is injured, whether physically or psychologically" (Herr: 241). To my knowledge, I

cannot remember witnessing any arguments where faculty and staff did not break it up and solve the issue with students and parents behind closed doors.

I remember attending school with two lesbian girls and I will always remember them as being very popular for their personality and their athletic abilities. Chicopee High School was very competitive in regards to sports teams and most of the athletes were popular amongst the student body. However, in understanding the concept of **institutional violence**—defined as violence that is "submerged from view so that its forms are almost completely invisible. Violence at this level includes harmful actions by societal institutions and their various organizational units that obstruct the spontaneous unfolding of human potential" (Herr: 241). While the most commonly reported acts of violence are aimed towards gay and lesbians, it is possible that many students at Chicopee High School were blinded by institutional violence because of its invisibility to outsiders. To my knowledge, Chicopee High School was a very well organized institution that accepted individuals for their academic abilities and skills, not to their inherent sexuality which should never be categorized as a problem.

In many ways, Chicopee High School was *very* different compared to any other high school I had ever attended. It was a small town school which consisted of many **cliques**—small groups that are derived from the neighborhood or a school setting (Bensman & Rosenberg: 80). As many of my peers grew up in the same town for most of their lives, they knew each other from the neighborhood and/or school. I was interested in trying out for the cheerleading squad but I was afraid of rejection. I knew I had the physical skills to be a cheerleader, but I was not sure if I had the social skills for the cheerleaders.

After attending Chicopee High School for two weeks I was able to pick up on the sexual double standard between the cheerleaders and the jocks. The sexual **double standard** is defined as the idea that women are disgraced by sex outside marriage; the sex transforms them into 'sluts' (Tanenbaum: 76). A **slut** is usually a girl that is categorized as promiscuous amongst her peers. "Roughly half of American teenagers are sexually active—in 1997, 49 percent of boys aged fifteen to nineteen reported ever having sexual intercourse, compared at the 48 percent of girls—but when it comes to moralizing about the excesses of teenage sexuality, girls alone are ridiculed and made to feel cheap" (Tanenbaum: 77). As I witnessed the degradation certain cheerleaders experienced in the hallways, I feared the idea of becoming visible to the jocks. The **jocks** were the popular guys in high school that embraced sports as part of their high school career (Eckert: 7). As part of me wanted to utilize my physical skills towards cheerleading, I did not want to gain a negative reputation in a new school environment, so I started to look into other after school clubs. Participation in after school clubs would be categorized as part of the jock environment as it is within the acceptance of the institution.

I always considered myself to be a good girl, so I was adamant about protecting my reputation as I was already trying to deal with overcoming the idea of being the new girl. Leora Tanenbaum believes a **good girl** is usually considered the smart girl that does not allow her peers to become involved in the morality that she maintains as a sense of self (91). I always had the tendency to mind my own business and stand clear of rumors. In some ways I desired belonging to a clique, but in other ways I was content in my own world of adjustment. In considering myself a good girl, the recent changes in my life forced me to feel insecure about myself and my surroundings. While I was still interested in meeting people, I decided to join a calligraphy club after school so I could focus some of my negative

energy on something positive and rewarding. One of my teachers suggested it because she thought I had a nice handwriting. At this point in my life, I was not about to turn down compliments or opportunities to engage my creative skills into something positive for my self-esteem.

It was a very slow process, but as time progressed I began to feel more comfortable in my school surrounding. As the comfort settled in, so did my ambition for independence. I decided that I was ready to find an after school job. I wanted to focus on my independence, such as obtaining a job, getting my license, and buying my first car. I knew that an after school job would allow me to accomplish these goals, as well as give me more opportunities to meet new people in my town.

I needed something to keep me productive as I decided to give myself space from my familial environment. My mother did not seem to appreciate bringing me places, so I was determined to find my own form of transportation by earning my license. In my job search, I sensed a lot of hesitation from management as they were afraid to hire a young individual, such as myself, because they wanted to feel as though they could depend on their employees. This was something I never thought I'd experience in my job search. As Susan Willis describes, "In an open market of casual youth employment, many teens move from one job to the next in a matter of weeks" (351).

This lack of faith in teenagers made me want to prove society wrong. I knew I was dependable, and I also knew I could handle the responsibility of a job. I promised myself that I would be as reliable as possible in my employment environment. Part of me was striving to become a producer so I could prove to myself and to society that I had self-worth and the capabilities to be independent and responsible. Cote and Allahar refer to maturity and responsibility as qualities acquired through experience and

practice (108). Two interviews later, I received my first job position as a sales associate in a small clothing chain called Cherry & Webb. I was hired at minimum wage, which was $5.25 at the time. Cote and Allahar believe that "young people lack power, rights, and legitimacy, which means they are disenfranchised. At the same time they are crucial to the economic system because they constitute a source of cheap labor, as well as a massive consumer market" (109). I knew I was underpaid as well as every other teenager due to the lack of experience and education obtained while searching for a first job. I was, however, excited for my new role as a sales associate and I was going to use this position as a stepping stone to gain the necessary experience to make me successful in the retail business.

In thinking back to obtaining my first job, I found myself able to relate to *Ghost World* in many different ways. Rebecca was the one character in the movie that I was able to identify with myself. She graduated from high school with aspirations of finding a job and moving out of her parent's house and into an apartment with her friend, Enid. She was successful in her job as she understood that the customer came before her thoughts, which is something that Enid was never able to understand when she began working. Rebecca's independence became apparently clear when she decided to look for an apartment by herself because she slowly came to realize that Enid was financially unstable as she was not able to maintain a steady job position. I feel as though my responsibility and need for independence was very much like Rebecca's character.

While my personal life was starting to pick up in social aspects, such as my newly founded after school activity and my new job, my home life was suffering tremendously as my mother and I did not have a very strong connection with one another. Everything I did was wrong. I was not clean enough for her around the house and

neither was my younger sister. She was always complaining about something and it was starting to make me feel unwelcome, just as I felt when I was attending school in Florida. Nancy Lesko describes this as "youth as probation." **Youth as a probation** is a period experienced during youth in which everything they do is monitored through some kind of adult supervision. Lesko elaborates on youth as "always 'becoming,' a situation that provoked endless watching, monitoring, and evaluating … careful development in-time was identified as the safest path" (111). As my mother continued to express her impatience with me, I started to spend less time at home and more time in school and at work to give myself distance from my familial situation. I kept telling myself it was only temporary and regardless of my mother's personality, she was still my mother and I was determined to make things work because this was *my* decision.

Throughout my junior year of high school, I spent most of my time working, studying, and participating in the calligraphy club. I was very devoted to my job because it was enabling me to feel a sense of responsibility and independence. In March of 1997, I enrolled in a driving school in Ludlow, Massachusetts. During this time, my mother was not making an effort to participate in my after school activities, such as work, school, and driving lessons so I had to find an alternative form of transportation. I never had these problems when I lived with my father as he would make arrangements for me regardless of his schedule. He always went out of his way to accommodate my needs and my mother was not like that at all. Luckily, my father was still a large part of my life and he was able to make arrangements with one of his friends in Massachusetts to transport me to my driving lessons every Wednesday after school. After three months of driving lessons, I earned my license.

I reached my first rite of passage at the age of sixteen and it was the first time in months that I felt good about myself and my accomplishments. The **rite of passage** is defined as the "experience that changes the status of the individual from within and without, in the eyes of other community members." Such rites require the participation, guidance, and witness of adults in the society (Hoffman: 59). … the acquisition of a driver's license is perhaps one of the earliest and most universally accepted benchmarks of pending adult status unrelated to school in our society" (Hoffman: 60). This rite of passage was so important to me and the fact that I had accomplished it made me feel as though I could accomplish anything. At this point, I had been saving all of my money for months and I finally had enough money in the bank to purchase my first car. I viewed owning a car as my ticket to freedom; freedom from adolescence and freedom from my living environment.

As my senior year approached, I started to feel a sense of personal identity again. I was working diligently at work and school and I felt as though I was on the road to success because I was finally determined. At the end of the summer, I saved $1,600 from my part time job. I worked so hard and saved every penny so I could officially call myself a consumer. My first large purchase, bought with my own savings, was my first car. It was a 1990 Ford Tempo with automatic seat belts. "Young people are enthusiastic consumers of many products of the mass media" (Cote & Allahar: 146). It was the first time in my life I had actually worked for something that I really wanted, and I felt a sense of accomplishment. My father raised me to save and spend money responsibly; however, my dependence on him throughout my childhood never gave me the opportunity to experience how it felt to earn my own money and save it for something that I truly desired. Fortunately, his sense of responsibility encouraged me to spend my money on things I needed, and not neces-

sarily the things everyone else had. I was never distracted by media sales through magazines or television. My sense of responsibility was an amazing feeling and for the first time in my life, I felt like a responsible adult.

It was finally my senior year of high school. As I began the last year of my high school career, I actually felt a sense of comfort in my educational environment. I was not exactly happy, but I was content with my life choices. On the first day back to school, I met someone who managed to imprint my life, my beliefs, and my values. His name was Michael[1]. I met him in English class and we became friends due to our competitiveness with each other in regards to our grades. At some point during our senior year, I felt a close bond forming between us and it felt so good to have that connection with someone again. I knew he was growing attached to me as well because I could feel it.

One day after school, we met at the park because he said he needed to talk to me about something important. I remember it was a ninety degree day in April. The sun felt so good on my face. As I sat under the tree next to Michael, he looked at me and told me he was in love with me. At that moment, I was not sure whether I should kiss him or slap him for potentially ruining our comfortable friendship. I decided to just stay calm because part of me felt like I was in love with him too; but most times I was so out of touch with my feelings after the trauma I just experienced in the last year. After that day, we started meeting up at night to watch movies or lie on the ground in the park and look at the stars. He would bring me flowers and he had this amazing ability to make me feel so loved and beautiful. By the end of our senior year, we were inseparable. Our friendship grew stronger; but not strong enough to turn our

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[1] Name has been changed to respect privacy.

friendship into a romance. For some reason, I could not bring myself to kiss him because I was afraid to lose myself to someone else.

As I began to separate myself from him, he became bitter and very upset with me. On the day of our high school graduation, he would not look at me or speak to me—it was heartbreaking. Six months after graduation, he finally called me and asked me to have lunch with him because he needed to talk to me. The last time he told me he needed to talk to me, he told me he was in love with me so I knew this was important. During our lunch, he apologized for his behavior in regards to our graduation and his lack of response to my phone calls prior to graduation. He told me that he was so upset about our distance with each other that he tried to kill himself. He had a large red scar on his neck and I felt as though he was blaming me for his attempted suicide. Mike Males writes, "Suicide is a pure indicator of high risk behavior, of self-destructive intent" (229).

By definition, suicide is always self-inflicted and always fatal" (Males: 229). As Michael did not succeed with his attempted suicide, he still found a way to place blame on me. Some days I still feel as though his actions in 1998 still affect my life decisions when it comes to dating and opening my life to another individual. "Suicides, like all forms of crime, are becoming more and more precocious. In these days children leave their marbles and tops to commit suicide, tired of life almost before they have tasted it" (Males: 231). The more I analyzed the situation involving Michael and me I realized that his reasons for attempted suicide were simplistic. He was a high risk teenager and his decision to potentially end his life had nothing to do with me as much as he wanted to blame me. Throughout the years, we have remained good friends. In many ways, I consider him to be my first true love because at times I felt he was my true soul-mate.

In thinking back to my adolescence, I wish I was more open-minded when my father and I moved to Florida. I spent a good portion of my adolescence trying to prove a point instead of enjoying my life and my freedom. Leaving my father was the first time I experienced a broken heart and I will never forget how much that affected my identity development. Many days I was unsure of who I was without him because he was my provider and caretaker. In conclusion, my decision to leave him and move back to Massachusetts made me a stronger person. I learned the concept of responsibility and independence which are two very important qualities when entering adulthood.

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