

**The Real World:  
Adult Mechanisms that Inhibit Radical Youth Social Change**

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She sat at her desk, decompressing after a student meeting, espousing her sorrow and worry for this generation of kids. She goes on to tell me that they aren't ok; that they need some perspective and the ability to not be triggered so easily.

I had sat as witness to the student meeting that just occurred, where a student expressed his concern over a teacher asking what he considered to be private questions about plastic surgery in a class assignment. As he spoke, my administrator pushed an agenda in which she touted the need to have difficult conversations in the classroom. On that point, she was right. However, it became clear that somewhere deep in her soul, she is/was/will be tired of having to be sensitive to the multitude of issues that students face. And in her desperation for the children to be ok, pushed the onus of resilience, perseverance and grit onto the student.

We do this all the time. Adults, I mean. Not just educators, but all of us. We liken grit to survival. And perhaps, in some cases, that is true. But the real story is that adults are constantly barricading themselves from the issues that the youth feel are important. In essence, our kids are evolving and we are telling them to stop.

And then she said it. As a million parents do. As a million teachers do. As a million adults do.

“Well, in the real world...”

I have said so to my own teenage daughter and to my high school students. But I just recently started thinking about how very damaging this idea is; this idea that their strategies, desires, and necessities are not congruent with how “the real world” works. And I began to wonder why that is; what are all of the pieces that bring generation after generation to this statement, this conclusion, that acts as a closed door for progression.

Turns out that there are many factors. The complexities of society and the ability to change and evolve both individually and collectively are vast; however, it is important to delve into some of the intricacies of change. We, as adults, whether teachers, principals or parents, at least need to understand, accept and perhaps even evolve past the crippling stoppage of change when we talk to our kids.

But first, let's talk about “the real world”.

### The Real World

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*“Driven by greed, ignorant of their connectedness to the whole, humans persist in behavior that, if continued unchecked, can only result in their own destruction.”*

*(Eckhart Tolle, 2005, p.11)*

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As humans in the anthropocene, it would be unconscionable to suggest that we haven't created a world in which rampant threats to our survival are consistently created by our own hands (Steffen et al., 2007). Our kids are witness to this. They are watching what seems like the literal destruction of civilization as they know it.

Currently, teenagers are seeing live-streamed bombings via TikTok and are emotionally involved in the personal stories of the Ukrainian citizens. They are digesting the fact that there are over 860 million undernourished people and that 782 million that have no access to safe drinking water. They feel in their bones the climate change predictions that show the destruction of the planet they live on...within their lifetimes. They see the mass extinctions of animals, mass shootings at schools, mass assaults, murders, and hate crimes on the indigenous and people of color. They are victims of code reds, gun drills, and barricading drills. They are living in a pandemic that has taken the lives of 6 million people worldwide, some of those within their own families, while adults bickered about mask mandates. They read of the consistent attacks on LGBTQ+ rights, the threat to reproductive rights for women, and anti-intellectualism of science and history. Wealth inequality strangles their parents' wallets while they read articles about rich white men going to space. I could go on listing the atrocities that drag on the souls of our kids, but I won't. You get it. They aren't living in our childhood; they are living in this new world and this is their reality.

“Adults keep telling you the pandemic will never end, your education is being destroyed by ideologues, digital technology is poisoning your soul, democracy is collapsing, and the planet is dying—but they're counting on you to fix everything when you grow up” (Packer, 2022).

Children are our future, right? They have to fix everything. So they better get those good grades and get into college. Parents, in what Derek Thompson calls the “rug rat race” constantly push them to do more extracurricular activities, go to more clubs, get involved in their communities, stay for tutoring, volunteer, and do anything they can to get themselves on stable ground in a university (2022). Yet these kids know that it's going to cost them, as the average price of a bachelor's degree in this country is over \$100,000; they stress about money and whether it's worth it or not. Meanwhile, parents are just trying to make sure their kids are ok...that their kids can make it...

...in the real world.

And all of this is taking its toll.

Everyday, I open my computer and read the news. Even within the last two weeks, I have read over 20 articles about the “teen’s mental health crisis.” It has been declared a national emergency by the American Academy of Pediatrics. Persistence of sadness and depression, bubbling anxiety and an overall sense of despair are wreaking havoc on our kids’ states of mind and overall well-being. These articles also attempt to help parents and teachers navigate their children’s mental health by giving them prompts to ask, being sure to look for warning signs and seeking professional help. (Pandey, 2022) In essence, doing all the “normal” things to help. But what is happening is that “Anxious parents, in seeking to insulate their children from risk and danger, are unintentionally transferring their anxiety to their kids” (Thompson, 2022). We are compounding what is already extraordinarily difficult to cope with.

As adults, many of us are traumatized by the constant barrage of upsetting news. But teenagers, unfortunately equipped with higher levels of cortisol than their adult counterparts, wake up each morning to a deluge of news that triggers even higher levels of anxiety than in their parents or teachers. (Krafsig, 2010) Under “normal circumstances,” this cortisol kicks in just enough to provide a sense of urgency that helps us meet our goals. But now, with what feels like an incredibly unsafe and threatening time to be alive, cortisol levels are remaining elevated. And this consistent stress has major effects on long term mental and physical health. “Teenagers who have high levels of anxiety as a result of exposure to stress and traumas will produce too much of the stress hormone cortisol into adulthood, which may contribute to an increase in mental and physical health issues” (Assari, 2015). Their anxiety is justified, long-term, and it’s a threat to their very wellbeing.

They are in survival mode.

They are in the jungle.

The real world is dangerous.

And we wonder why kids retreat to their phones. We are worried about the overuse of technology and social media but we, in fact, have created the world in which kids have to escape in order to keep any semblance of normalcy. Yet, there is increased danger even there, potentially stoking the already daunting task of **existing** right now, let alone be the future of it.

And then, on top of that, we are shouting to the rooftops that kids are too fragile! “Kids are being given some really dangerous messages these days about the fact that they can’t handle

being triggered, that they shouldn't have to bear witness to anything that makes them uncomfortable..." (Benoit Denizet, 2017, p.8). We suggest that students need to change their behaviors to avoid anxiety. They need to find balance in their choices with social media, practice mindfulness, learn digital citizenship, improve their communication, increase their connections to school (Tomoniko, 2019). But folks, this is more serious than that. In 2018, suicide rates for people aged 10-24 jumped almost 60 percent and the share of adolescents reporting a major depressive episode jumped 60 percent between 2007-2019 (Freyman, 2022). That was before the pandemic!

Well, then they need to be resilient! "It is ironic that at the same time that young people's mental health has become a social and public issue, the highly individualized concept of resilience has come into vogue among professionals who deal with troubled youth." (Wyn & White, 2000, p. 177) This isn't a matter of self-advocacy or resiliency or getting off the phone. This is the world crashing. As Crutzen & McNeill state, "by the time humans realize that a business-as-usual approach may not work...collapse of modern, globalized society... is one possible outcome" (2007, p. 619). We need to lift the veil of our adult blindness and lackadaisical approach. The kids know what's happening and are crying out for real change and making moves towards real revolution.

But in the real world, the youth power is ignored or usurped.

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*"Youth is simultaneously constituted as a place and time of marginality and powerlessness and as a bearer of a whole series of special symbolic powers."*

*(Cohen, 1997, p.225)*

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Young people have been on the news trying desperately to make change. After the Parkland school shooting, student activists have been fighting for changes in gun laws. Greta Thunberg has garnered attention for her no-nonsense approach to climate activism. The youth took to the streets for the Black Lives Matter movement, exposed the school to prison pipeline and have fought against anti-immigration policies- and women's rights. "Despite personal worries, racial unrest, a polarizing climate and disillusionment with politicians, government and big tech, [they] want to actively create a better future" (Harvard Youth Poll, 2021). They are motivated.

This is especially true for minority youth. Young Blacks (41%) are significantly more likely to be politically engaged than they were a decade ago (Harvard Youth Poll, 2021). Interestingly,

Generation Z doesn't necessarily align itself with either Democrat or Republican parties but youth voter turnout has increased by 48% in 2018 than it was in 2014. They are the most diverse generation that the United States has ever had and are also the most comfortable generation in changing and reshaping the prevailing cultural norms. (Business Insider, 2019)

This ease of reconstructing norms can be seen in the way in which youth approach change. They are more apt to protest (Shadmehr & Haschke, 2015) and utilize social structures and intersectionality than older generations. "Young people in many contexts equate agency with the cultivation of interdependencies rather than individual action and autonomy" (Jeffrey, 2011, p. 250). In addition, due to their lack of bondage to special interests and current social structures, they are less likely to follow any prescribed politicalization which would inhibit how they would move forward with social change (Bandura & Cherry, 2019). This mix creates a unique pathway to both political engagement and activism (Wray-Lake, 2019).

Examples of this include using social media as a platform for justice and social movements. As Luttig and Cohen stated, "The Internet has opened up virtual spaces that bypass traditional gatekeepers." Especially marginalized youth are increasingly engaged in what is called "participatory politics." This type of political action is "peer-based, interactive, nonhierarchical, and collective" (Nam, 2016). Using the digital web, where socioeconomics, race and levels of education do not stop access to content, youth are converging and discussing social change (Luttig & Cohen, 2006). We see this in the undocumented youth movement, in which their increasing awareness systematic oppression and its effects across various communities of which they were involved propelled them to take action on social justice issues beyond just immigrant rights. (Terriquez et al., 2018).

Another, seemingly "radical" manifestation of youth activism is through digital vigilantism. In a world where youth see unjust responses to criminality, especially in the areas of sexual assault, harrasment, abuse, and police brutality, young social media users are "calling out" or "naming and shaming" individuals deemed guilty, potentially dangerous, or predatory (Dunsby & Howes, 2018). This has potential to change the landscape of the criminal justice system, by valuing the immediate protection of the community over traditional accountability measures. Users did show that they understood the potential issues with impeding justice through the court system, however, the idea of fostering community welfare stood as first priority. Again, demonstrating a strong bond to collective well-being over individual autonomy. As Celina del Felice and Andria Wisler stated "Young people possess valuable knowledge of the needs that exist among their peers, based on their own experiences and close contact in their age group. Adults are or seem to be clueless about young people's behavior, language, and ways of communicating. Youth set priorities different from adults and this diversity of perspectives should be appreciated" (Felice & Wisler, 2007, p.25). But we don't appreciate this diversity of perspectives. We don't understand

the importance of them being on their phones. We don't accept that their approaches can act as catalysts for real social change.

Though scholars, parents, teachers, even adult youth advocates clearly understand the importance of youth as central in social, global and economic developments, and espouse their essentiality to "making the world a better place," they are, "increasingly more disenfranchised from the decision making process" (Ho et al., 2015). We have taken away any semblance of power from them.

And what is happening, as Clay and Turner describe, is the "managerialist subterfuge" of radical youth activism. As they describe, adults have a prescribed ideological framework of methods and approaches of activism. This then dampens or subdues the original youth vision and strategies of activism and mobilization. In essence, we are co-opting, coercing, and funneling their progressive ideas into those that are more mainstream. This mainstream armature consists of more bureaucratic goals or processes rather than those which would transform the systems themselves and ultimately change the dynamics of power (2021). In essence, adults are asking youth to be polite, civil, and shoot for gradual change.

So, yes, this young generation is suffering and are showing the effects of long-term stress and anxiety. But when they try to make the changes that would truly have long lasting effects that would catalyze the erasure of oppression, radical climate change policies, and intersectional equity, we create "symbolic, shallow and patronizing" "partnerships" that disallow for the measure of change that truly needs to happen (Clay & Turner, 2021). We subdue them.

We, adults, need to look at ourselves.

We created the real world.

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### Adult Attitudes & Attributes

So what are some of the mechanisms that keep adults, even those who deem themselves youth advocates, usurping, knowingly and unknowingly, the power of student or youth activism? Surely there are thousands of spokes in this cog, however, it seems that there four major contributors to adult hesitation and interruption to social change: the concept of youth as marginal citizens, the psychological aversion to change, the perceived cognitive rigidity of adults, and the overarching way in which white supremacy culture shapes our worldview.

Let's dig in, shall we, adults?

### **Citizens in the making**

As Kennelly discusses, adults are considered to be “fully realized autonomous” people (2011). We, the grown ups, get this designation through participating in normal corporate and bureaucratic processes such as paying taxes, being consistent consumers, and having self-control over our behaviors; whereas, youth are deemed not fully realized learners who require guidance in traversing these established procedures, operations and socio-emotional standards (Kennelly, 2001). “Adults are regarded as authentic citizens with the requisite authority to help, apprentice, or instruct youths’ development while some youth - largely dependent on their race and class - are regarded as “citizens in waiting” (Clay & Tuner, 2021, p. 5). This underlying belief that young people do not possess the intellectual and/or strategic prowess to comprehend, let alone navigate, the complexity of the systems around them leads to the constraining of the transformational power that they possess. We still hold a desire for them, as future citizens, to shape the world they live in. But we want them to do it within the limits of only superficial problems and not tackling deepset structural issues that would require institutional change (Clay & Turner, 2021). We tell them that they are our future; we don’t really trust them or want them to make radical change.

### **Psychology of change**

Change is scary! It is especially scary when change isn’t technical but rather adaptive. Adaptive change requires us to exit our own social paradigms, break from tradition and even reform our values. As Marzano & Waters indicate in Osborne’s article, adaptive change is a break from the past that is often complex, non-linear, and requires new skills that may not be as valued as previous ones were (2014). This, of course, often brings up a sense of defensiveness and alerts us to hold onto previous, known, and comfortable perspectives. Losing this safety of the known, feels like a form of grief and pushes us into what feels like unsafe spaces (2006). Awareness that this discomfort is normal in the face of major change is the first step towards transformation. “This acknowledgement is crucial for leading change because we know that if people are feeling threatened or unsafe, they are less likely to fully engage the rational, logical part of their brain. So while the change might sound perfectly well-reasoned, rational, and common-sense, this doesn’t guarantee that people will fully engage with it” (Osborne, 2014, p.4). We have to understand that we are having a fear response, accept that, but not allow it to rule our actions, either consciously or unconsciously.

### **Cognitive Adaptability**

That’s hard to do! Especially when we know that like cognitive ability, openness to experience declines in old age. The idea that we get stuck in our ways, tends to be true. But good news! Adults, through even mild interventions, such as engaging in intellectually and culturally



stimulating experiences, were able to change their personality and experienced sustained openness to new ideas (Jackson, et al., 2012). This brain plasticity has broad implications for our ability to change. Knowing this and intentionally seeking activities that push our boundaries as we grow older, will help create a continual elevation in ability to change. As Glisczinski explained, when we seek stimuli that engages and allures us, it elicits positive neurotransmissions in our hippocampus. This learning, in turn, invites more neurons to fire thus creating new pathways for sensory experience, releasing dopamine along the way (Glisczinski, 2015). This becomes the cycle of transformative learning within the brain, creating intrinsic motivation to continue to experience and explore more new and interesting things - leading to increased openness. This can catalyze personality change which is transformative learning (Schwaba, et.al, 2017). Well, why is that transformative learning important for adults? Because it leads us to have a “rational discourse on the accuracy of the assumptions, values, beliefs, and judgments that shape our thought and behavior (Glisczinski 2015, p. 24). We then reassess our lives, our beliefs and our world. It’s a beautiful feedback loop that will create more adventurous and unencumbered adults - that perhaps may be more open to the ideas and values of younger generations. It’s not a quick fix. It takes time and a commitment to changing the way we behave along with changing our meaning-making systems. “This definition of transformation requires that someone changes not just what he or she thinks but how he or she thinks about things” (Berger, 2004, p. 338). This can be incredibly uncomfortable and disorienting. Confusion and uncertainty are a part of transformation, as we are realigning ourselves with an indefinable future (Berger, 2004). We can alleviate some of this by keeping our commitment to openness in the forefront - making this our ultimate purpose. We need a purpose to believe it. As a purpose to believe in, reinforcement systems, the skills required for change, and consistent role models set us up to be able to change and sustain that change (Lawson & Price, 2003). In simpler terms, us old dogs can learn new tricks, but we have to intentionally set out to learn them, hang out with others with the same mindsets, and use critical reflection regularly to assess our own growth edges even when it makes us uncomfortable. It takes sustained courage and “resilience.”

Sound familiar?

We ask our kids to be resilient and courageous but we, ourselves, are often not.

### **White Supremacy Culture**

Beyond our internal capacities for change, we need to look at the larger forces that are also at play in our willingness to accept social change. What’s at play in the real world. Well, the real world is one in which white supremacy culture shapes the discourse, the values and the power dynamics that control our lives. This culture is toxic and exploitative and pervades every nook and cranny of our existence, yet many of us are unaware of exactly how it shows up in our attitudes, actions and beliefs. This, of course, then spills over into how we accept and react to

youth change, especially when the impetus of these changes seeks to dismantle the standards by which we are so used to upholding. However, as Mckenzie Parpia states, there is a “collective waking up” that is happening (2020). People, especially the youth, are calling attention to the systems and structures that are in place that serve to oppress and discriminate against communities of color. Beyond these concrete constructs, the invisible ways in which white supremacy culture impacts our conduct need to be evaluated and addressed.

Okun & Jones’ widely esteemed resource, *Dismantling Racism: A Workbook for Social Change Groups*, identifies several characteristics of white supremacy culture that often rule our actions and beliefs. Firstly, “the right to comfort” dictates that those in power have the absolute right to emotional and psychological safety and comfort (2001). Therefore when we hear new value systems from youth - even as small as changing dress codes at schools to be more equitable for girls, we shutter at the discomfort that it would bring to the adults in the building. I hear this all that time at school; arguments abound constantly at staff meetings about the pseudo appropriateness of clothing. Don’t want to make the history teacher uneasy! Surely it’s the kids at fault!

Uncomfortable conversations about disenfranchisement and discrimination are halted as it creates a tension that evades this sense of comfort. “Our nation expends a good deal of effort trying to avoid what Carl Jung referred to as “legitimate suffering,” or the pain of the human experience. The stockpiling of resources in privileged portions of the population so that they may be “immune” to suffering, while heaping the unnatural causes of socially toxic environments onto others, creates undeserved suffering while simultaneously delegitimizing it” (Duncan-Andrade, 2009, p. 189). Pushing the onus onto others leads into another characteristic that Okun identifies, the fear of open conflict (2001). Here there is an emphasis on being polite. Don’t talk about religion or politics at the dinner table, right? Avoidance of discussion is paramount in upholding the status quo of discriminatory systems. So we, as adults, need to get comfortable with discomfort and start talking. We need to learn how to have conversations that address what are seemingly taboo subjects - because these are precisely the subjects that are upholding dehumanizing structures. Avoidance is a way of holding onto power. And in power hoarding, another characteristic, those with power feel threatened when change is suggested and often take it personally as a reflection of themselves which then brings about defensiveness, because ultimately, those in power feel like they are capable of making decisions about others (2001).

So inherently, as adults saturated in white supremacy culture, we feel the need to hold onto the power, keeping it from the youth as we are confident in our own abilities to make decisions that we deem appropriate for others. This hierarchy of power is seen in every institution that youth are entrenched in. So in essence, they always endure the oppression.

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*“Despite our best intentions, even our most beloved leaders and trusted organizations can find themselves perpetuating exploitative white supremacy norms that seek conformity and control over authenticity and expansiveness.”*

*(McKenzie Parpia, 2020, p.2)*

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### **Get Real and Get out of the Way**

Well, so let’s build a real world where kids can actually make a difference.

How you ask?

#### **Look Inward**

First recognize that our kids are developing critical consciousness. They are examining multiple systems of oppression and are paying attention to the social, cultural, and historical roots of them (Godfrey & Burson, 2018). As those living the experience of marginalization, the youth is evolving the scope and shape of how to transform these systems. And we need to listen. We need to get uncomfortable; sit in discomfort and empathize. We need to be self-aware of our biases and the depth of our conscious and unconscious coerciveness. We need to give genuine agency to the youth which requires true freedom in making choices (Wood & Hicks, 2002). We need to lead with audacious hope. Not just teachers, counselors, parents, all adults need to, as Duncan-Andrade states, “show solidarity to share in others’ suffering, to sacrifice self so that other roses may bloom, to collectively struggle to replace the concrete completely with a rose garden” (2009, p.186). This statement is so powerful; share in the suffering of others, give up the power that you hold, and make space for others to shine. We hold on so dearly to our safety and comfort that we rarely realize that in doing so we have cast shadows on others.

#### **Truly Employ Youth Power**

Then, after loads of self-reflection and a commitment to continuing to dismantle the oppressive attitudes and reactions that we have, we need to act. We need to dissolve our stereotypical assumptions about youth and our responses to youth. We need to realize the potential power of youth activism and support through both political and social movements. We need to actively encourage young people in power positions and governance (Jaiprakash et al., 2019). And most importantly, we need to ask THEM what they envision for themselves, how to best amplify their voices both within and beyond the typical state-sanctioned bureaucratic solutions and in what ways can we help provide them with any tools that they may need (Clay & Turner, 2021).

Adults, we are the real world and we're making it worse. We need to recognize the trauma that our kids are going through and not act as if nothing is happening. We need to show them that we understand that they are justified in being totally anxious, depressed and angry. We need to tell them that we take responsibility for our faults and then we need to model change.

We need to get real and get out of the way.

We need to let them fix the real world in their way.

Because it's their real world now.

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*“The true wealth of a nation lies not in its foreign exchange reserves and riches, but in its citizens, especially its youth. Youth have the power to transform and hence, on their strong shoulders, rests the responsibility of leading the nation towards progress and prosperity.”*  
*(Jaiprakash et al., 2019, p. 110)*

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