

Over the course of the past year, I have been privileged to listen to hundreds of individuals talking about the forces that have shaped their lives and the lives of those around them.

The research has explored many key themes in young adult culture, but not all of these are self-evident from the quotes themselves. So, in the following pages, I offer an additional list of observations and explanations. None of these issues is new, it is simply that their intensity and prevalence seem to have heightened dramatically in the past few years, and the younglives research predicts that they will continue to do so.

This report is divided into 3 parts:

Part 1: What life is like in the UK and USA in the year 2000.

Part 2: What this life leaves us wanting most of all.

Part 3: Where this might be leading.

Part 1

What life is like in the UK and USA in the year 2000.

Amid the increasing demands of the daily routine, it's been all too easy to lose sight of what really makes our life worth living.

Without clear destinations from which to take our bearings, and without knowing what we want from the journey, it's all but impossible to plan our route.

This diminished sense of purpose and direction is very likely the result of two interwoven factors:

- i) A daily life of excessive complexity and pressure.
- ii) A shortage of life-guidance and support from once traditional sources.

i) A daily life of excessive complexity and pressure.

Where is the excessive pressure and complexity coming from, and what is the result? The following is a list of common causes and consequences, all strongly related to each other.

- **Western society is suffering from excessive individualism:** Because of our geographically and socially mobile society, people think less in terms of belonging to communities, groups or families, but more in terms of self. As individuals, we stand alone and so are judged by our personal characteristics such as our appearance, exam grades, qualifications, job title, income and possessions. In our heightened state of anxiety, there is a strong tendency to compare ourselves with others, however superficial or irrelevant that comparison might be.
- **The popular media is responding to and promoting this excessive individualism:** Because, as individuals, we lack the sense of security and confidence that comes from feeling that we are a valued member of a community or family, we are prone to feel painfully self-conscious and lonely. This leaves us vulnerable to the media images that encourage us to bolster ourselves by purchasing social props.
- **Consumer brands are more important than ever before** because of the absence of other beacons broadcasting clear and attractive values. Society is losing its usual sources of life-guidance such as the churches and the nuclear and extended family who offer the wisdom and balance of older generations. With the decline of credible alternatives, the marketing media and the new technologies are exerting inordinately powerful influence.
- **There's message and media overload:** The proliferation of TV channels, of internet and of mobile phones within the past five years, means that media messages and communication pretending to offer greater choice, have become increasingly complex and intrusive. (Our ambivalent relationship with new technology has been reflected in the success of films such as Terminator I & II; Enemy of the State; and The Matrix.)
- **Information is mistaken for understanding, and watching is mistaken for experiencing:** Why do it when we can watch it on TV? After all, TV shows provide our surrogate families and regular friends. But is this really living, or are we becoming mere tourists of our own lifetime?
- **Individuals feel invisible:** It's hard to see how we can be significant or valued in a world that seems so fixated on a TV or computer screen, or is talking on a mobile phone to someone seemingly far more interesting than ourselves.
- **Young people suffer from delayed recognition as fully-fledged adults,** mainly because ever more qualifications seem to be required to enter the professional work arena.
- **There's widespread uncertainty in the job-market:** Nobody is sure where the working world is going, or what shape it will take in even two years time, and so nobody knows how to prepare for it.

- **There are demoralising inequities in the social rewards for one job compared to another:** Every day, we read about the £10 million per annum 21 year old soccer star, or the dot-com millionaire aged 25. What does this say about our society's appreciation of the £25,000 per year Secondary School Teacher who just turned 30?
- **Young people face increased competition for their traditional social roles:** The 20-somethings are having to compete socially with a generation of non-parent 30-somethings who have refused to become 'middle-aged'.
- **Gender roles are shifting painfully:** While some young men still feel sore at having lost their inheritance of social privileges and guaranteed employment, young women have the added pressure of expectations to achieve in the new climate that pretends that everything is well within reach now and tilted in their favour.
- **Study and working-life feel like a treadmill of false progress:** There is a nagging suspicion that life is a series of false endings, whereby our striving for school exams only lures us onto a college degree, and then a professional qualification, and then a particular job title and so on towards an ever receding horizon. It's just one essay, one exam, one qualification after another, we can never get ahead, and too rarely if ever have the satisfaction of feeling that something is completed. This constant and excessive work schedule not only brings exhaustion and loneliness, but leads to neurotic and compulsive thinking, and physical ticks and twitches.
- **We punish ourselves for not reaching targets set for us by media, parents and the education system.** We're encouraged to be very self-critical, and we suspect that we don't come up to some imaginary mark. Angry with ourselves, we adopt self-punishing behaviours, denying ourselves even fundamental and positive pleasures. Occasionally we crack, and to escape our painful feelings we binge on such things as fiction or fantasy or food or drugs or ill-considered sexual relationships.
- **Eating disorders among teenage girls have reached epidemic proportions:** 8 in 10 teenage girls have 'an unhelpful relationship with food', which means fads, diets, guilt, junk-food, or some degree of bulimia, all of which lead to insufficient daily nutrition, resulting in impaired physical growth and impaired mental development.
- **Young guys feel worried and depressed at the prospect of being regarded as 'losers'** in a complex working world that feels as though it's denying them a place while favouring young women professionally.
- **We're disappointed with ourselves and our lives.** We don't like the way that we're irritable with other people, the way we're nervous of the consequences of what we do and say, that we're shy and neurotic and awkward inside ourselves, and daren't pursue even our dearest-held dreams. Our daily life feels homogeneous and sanitised, and we wonder what it would be like to live a while with the throttle wide open. We fear reaching 30 and looking back with the pain of regret for things not said and done.

- Feeling faintly miserable is our average emotion - the general 'default emotion' because every day life feels almost out of control, teetering on the brink of disaster, where all the demands will overwhelm us like a tidal wave. We know that our goal in life is to be happy; but we really aren't sure how to achieve this. Rebellion isn't just around the corner, but disillusionment is, eased only by time in the company of our much-loved friends.

ii) A shortage of life-guidance and support from once traditional sources.

This pressured and complex environment of 21st century western society is made worse because there is less guidance and less support from the traditional sources. This is due largely to:

- **The changing dynamics of the family:** Either because of parental separation or demanding parental careers, the young person has less time with mums and dads, aunts, uncles and grandparents who once would have offered reassurance and guidance. Some teenagers are even having to 'parent their single parents' when either mum or dad faces a mid-life crisis precipitated by the rapidly changing world. This too-early burden of responsibility can often result in the teenager forfeiting important aspects of their own adolescence.
- **Overstretched educational institutions:** Schools and universities are adversely affected by the climate of financial pressure and administrative complexity, while teachers and lecturers are themselves affected by the numerous demands on individuals that are outlined above. This means that educational institutions are less effective in their crucial role of inspiring and supporting a young individual's life-values.
- **The dilution of religious influence:** There is only minority acceptance of the traditional religious life-codes, and church-related support groups attract little popularity.

Part 2

What this life leaves us wanting most of all

I believe that the relative popularity of best-selling films directly reflects the pertinence of certain life-themes to the individuals that watch them. With this in mind, I endeavour to pair each point below with some illustrative box-office success stories. Note how certain films corner the market in key themes.

- **The Zeitgeist for the first decade of the year 2000 promises to be the question: “How to lead a meaningful and significant life? What is my reason for being?”** These are crucial questions which hold the motivational key to our every attitude and behaviour. If the new technologies have been the most dominant feature of the 1990s, individuals have started to reflect upon what on earth they want all that speed-of-light information for in the first place. Because so many of the traditional rule-books and route-maps to life are now outdated or discredited, there is a pervasive fear that our lives will be trivial, and we yearn for some clear cause, some worthy battle that is greater than ourselves. (A key theme in The Star Wars Trilogy; The Sixth Sense; Good Will Hunting; Toy Story 1 & 2; Titanic; Saving Private Ryan; Independence Day; and Armageddon.)
- **We want to discover some extra dimension to life**, whether Mother Nature, Information Technology, a government conspiracy on a massive scale, Alien Beings, or even Good and Evil. In the vacuum left by the shrinking influence of formal religion, there is a longing for some ‘unseen factor’ that is just below the surface. (A key theme in Men in Black; Independence Day; Enemy of the State; The X-Files; Twister; Jurassic Park; The Matrix; The Blair Witch Project; and The Sixth Sense.)
- **We need to have a satisfying public role in life so as to bring us an affirming sense of identity:** Ever-popular are films and TV shows, fiction and non-fiction, that focus on the emergency and helping professions and other high-action, high-profile occupations that have broad public appeal. (A key theme in ER; Good Will Hunting; Saving Private Ryan; and The Sixth Sense.)
- **There has been a rejection of films that sell aggression, malevolence or amorality**, because our real life is quite difficult enough. Consequently, in the last couple of years, films that have peddled gratuitous horror or amorality have done poorly at the box office. (For example: I Know What You Did Last Summer 2; Cruel Intentions; Fight Club; Go; and Happiness.)
- **There is widespread championing of ‘the individual’, no matter how humble that person.** (A key theme in The Wedding Singer; The Full Monty; Titanic; Notting Hill; The Simpsons; Toy Story 1 & 2; American Beauty; Saving Private Ryan; Forrest Gump; and Titanic.) Hand in glove with this sentiment goes a diminishing sense of interest or allegiance in anything political, national, community or institutional.

- **Pleasing yourself' and the search for personal happiness, is regarded as a highly legitimate goal.** This is closely allied to introspection which is very much in fashion, only there is considerable uncertainty about what the building blocks of happiness and fulfillment might be. (A key theme in Antz; Good Will Hunting; American Beauty; and The Beach.) It seems that reckless fun is only a temporary response to worry and pressure, rather than a genuine bid for happiness. No one believes in the merits of taking instant gratification, it's just that we feel forced into it by circumstances.
- **Compassion for the underdog, the 'nerd', the 'misfit', is on the rise** as we become increasingly aware of our own soft underbelly. However, owning up to our fragility strikes very close to home, and is best broached with lots of humour.. (A key theme in Forrest Gump; Austin Powers; American Pie; Something About Mary; The Simpsons; and American Beauty.)
- **We are attracted to larger-than-life personalities, or someone bravely reaffirming their identity.** We gravitate towards those people who seem comfortable inside their skins, and who are enjoying themselves. (Key themes in Austin Powers: the spy who shagged me, and American Beauty, respectively.) Such out and out eccentricity is a refreshing contrast to how we feel most of the time.
- **Sons desperately crave the support of their fathers,** and related to this is a major psychological need for Male Mentors, probably because young guys are finding it harder to progress from adolescence to respectable manhood in a social and economic climate that seems stacked against them. (A key theme in Men in Black; Enemy of The State; The Matrix; Good Will Hunting; and The Sixth Sense.)
- **Enduring friendships are paramount in our lives.** In reaction to the ever more pressured and complex world, qualities such as listening and caring and "won't let you down" are becoming increasingly appealing traits, and are fast competing with or even overtaking the attractiveness of 'cool, beautiful, clever and self-contained'. For the great majority of individuals, it has been the companionship enjoyed during significant periods of time spent with friends and lovers that have made them most glad to be alive; and it is the memory and hope of such intimate relationships with particular people and places, that is fundamentally important to them. (A key theme in Good Will Hunting; X-Files; Shakespeare in Love; Notting Hill; and Toy Story.)
- **In a virtual age when so much is seen and so little done, we crave the intimacy of physical and sexual contact. And in an information age that threatens to drown emotion, we crave the intimacy of romance.** (Romantic & sexual expression are key themes in Titanic; Shakespeare in Love; Notting Hill; American Pie; and American Beauty.) Whether you can risk having a sexual relationship with your all-important friends, is a major dilemma.
- **Certain personality traits are universally attractive:** Men and women alike are very attracted to humour, thoughtfulness, passion for what you do, direction and self-motivated ambition, feeling comfortable with yourself, ability to enjoy yourself and be happy, and taking more interest in other people than yourself. (In fact, all those things we suspect ourselves of lacking, because under today's pressures we feel neurotic, cowardly, dull, directionless, exhausted, miserable, and self-obsessed.)

- **Certain physical traits are universally attractive:** If you're a woman, it's not boobs, bums, thighs or blonde hair that are the keys to your attractiveness; if you're a guy it's not big muscles. For both sexes, it's your eyes, smiles and voice which are your most attractive features once anyone's gone beyond the first five minutes with you - probably because your eyes, voice and smile say so much about you, and about how you regard the person with whom you're talking. We might fantasise about being drop-dead gorgeous, but just about everyone would happily settle for feeling confident within their body and being fit and toned.
- **There has been a marked increase in sexual relationships between young women in their late teens and early twenties.** There is now a generation of high-flying, hot-shot young women professionals in their early and mid twenties whose glamorous job status makes them highly attractive to slightly younger but equally ambitious women. These lesbian affairs do not exclude heterosexual relationships, which very often run in parallel.
- **For the past few years, there has been a male counter-attack against the more extreme manifestations of feminism and Political Correctness.** Young men are eager to gain back just a little ground in the battle for equality, and their greatest weapon is humour provided liberally by relaunched magazines and new movies. (A key theme in Loaded and FHM magazines; and Austin Powers; South Park; the Simpsons; and Something about Mary.)
- **We want to laugh at ourselves and our society - because although we may be slaves to the system, we ain't fooled by it.** (This would explain the universal success of the affectionately self-recriminating cultural satires of authors Bill Bryson and Helen Fielding; and the screen comedies such as American Pie, Austin Powers, South Park and The Simpsons.)
- **Young people hanker for more emotionally expressive cultures, with less stress on educational and career success.** Hence, travel has become a key touchstone for the 'care-free independence and escape' so sought-after. (A key theme in The Beach.)
- **A nostalgia for the mythical heydays of the 20th century.** This nostalgia is born largely of a fear of, or even despair in, the future. The past, whether real or imagined, offers a sense of security and comfort. Many of us would dearly like to travel back in time so as to guide younger versions of ourselves in more fulfilling directions. Maybe then, our present predicament could be avoided. (This nostalgic time travel is a key theme in Austin Powers; Titanic; and The Sixth Sense.)

Part three

Where this might be leading

With all of the above in mind, the younglives research would predict that the first ten years of the new century will be characterised in the West by a gentle revolution in which individuals increasingly prioritise their 'quality of life in terms of emotional satisfaction'. To this end, the 'all-round development of oneself' will become the most popular raison d'être - a culture whose icon will be the person exploring and developing in positive and enjoyable ways all aspects of their physical, intellectual, emotional and spiritual life-experience.

The most pioneering individuals will increasingly reassess their whole approach to life, weighing-up their 'standard of living' by how much they feel that they are fulfilling their most profoundly meaningful goals - meaningful by their own standards, not by anyone else's. Consequently, they will pay less attention to the qualifications, badges, income and status-goals that have held sway for so long.

This emphasis on 'quality of life' will not manifest itself in a drug-fuelled naive free-for-all. The recreational drug culture has largely arisen out of despair at how life feels, and will fast lose its appeal when confronted by more enduringly satisfying alternatives. Individuals won't lose their determination to achieve, they will simply personalise and broaden their ambitions. People will more and more want to enjoy the journey to their goals; and an enjoyable journey will be acknowledged as a worthy end in itself.

This emerging culture of all-round personal development will benefit those who are students, or those who are looking for, but have not yet found, paid employment. This is because it emphasises the personal control that each individual can exercise over their own quality of life-experience, and acknowledges that there are many sources of satisfaction other than those derived from the confines of academic performance or a pay-packet.

It is possible that if Britain's economy enjoys a high boom over the next two years, perhaps fuelled by the new communications industries, the most avant-garde young adults might be persuaded to postpone their 'all-round personal development' if they think they can make a fortune by working flat out in one direction for five years. But these same individuals are on a short fuse, not least because they've essentially been frontline young executives with their foot to the floor since they were 11 years old. Given half a chance, they would like to embark on a whole new adventure: designing and living their own lives.

What will motivate this gentle revolution in life-values?

- There have been several decades of aggressive materialism which have not brought the increase in pleasure from life that had been anticipated. Moreover, the traditional social prizes of wealth, beauty, status and fame have been widely deglamorised by the media's ever more searing exposés, and this will spur individuals to consider more profound and durable alternatives.

- The work markets will increasingly require individuals to be self-responsible for managing their own work and leisure lives, inevitably leading us to pay more attention to how we invest our time. Moreover, the internet and other information technologies will allow us to develop our personal and professional lives at our own pace.
- Leading companies are increasingly recognising the need for 'well rounded personalities' among their young intake. This will encourage employers to offer attractive 'life-style concessions' to the most sought-after young adults, and this substantial change in requirements will fast effect the values and culture of the more receptive Universities and Secondary Schools.
- Star individuals and major brands are increasingly willing and able to completely reinvent themselves, and this 'license to transform yourself' is equally useful to adventurous individuals in any walk of life.
- Trail-blazer brands are explicitly urging young adults to reclaim themselves - which is what younglives.com is all about: helping us to become who and what we want to be, no matter where we are at the moment.

The Spirit of our Time

Of all the movies cited above as in some way capturing a part of the Zeitgeist, it is American Beauty that most closely reflects the younglives research findings so far. (My gratitude to Alan Ball and Sam Mendes, writer and director respectively.)

Lester may be a 42 year old Advertising Executive, but many of his self-criticisms are sentiments that individuals half his age or younger would fear were equally applicable to themselves:

"It's okay. I wouldn't remember me either."

"I feel like I've been in a coma for about 20 years, and I'm just now waking up."

Unsurprisingly in respect of this, an underlying theme of the film seems to be 'wanting to have our youth again, and this time to get it right'...which is a thought that goes as much for the 16 and 18 year olds as for Lester and his Estate-Agent wife.

When considering the value of material possessions, Lester observes "It's-just-a-couch! This isn't life, this is just stuff. And it's become more important to you than living. Well, honey, that's just nuts." But from the catalogue of recriminations, emerges a powerful sense of hope: "It's never too late to get it back." The Pontiac Firebird that Lester always wanted since he was a boy and finally buys for himself, isn't a show of materialism, it's the emotional realisation of a lifelong dream, it's a declaration of his need for beauty and joy. And once he starts treating himself right, he starts treating other people right as well. Rather than having sex with the 16 year old apple of his eye, Lester makes her a sandwich; and this same young women reciprocates his compassion by asking him 'How are you?' - and she means it, too.

Lester is right: "It's a great thing when you realise you still have the ability to surprise yourself."

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