Autobiographical Analysis:
Coming of Age in American: the Late 70's and Early 80's
I came of age in the Middle and High Schools of Brighton, New York during the late 1970s and early 1980s. In many ways, those feel like simpler times. More nuclear families were intact; families spent more free time together in the home. Outside the home, we teenagers were, to a fair degree, left alone, allowed to pursue our own relatively unstructured and unsupervised activities (attached are two articles from the Brighton Pittsford Post capturing the atmosphere of the period.) Technology in the classroom consisted of the photo copier, the mimeograph, the tape recorder, and the film and film strip projectors. The Computer Room held a few IBM PC's that, at best, could be programmed with DOS to play video Ping Pong.

Brighton is a relatively affluent town just outside Rochester, often characterized as the “Jewish suburb” of Monroe County with a High School population of approximately 35% (compared with 2.2% nationwide). If made to decide, I—half Jewish—would have probably placed myself in that category. The town is home to many professionals: doctors, lawyers, educators, non-profit administrators, etc. My parents were an urban planner and a math teacher and, while not as wealthy as many of our more well-healed brethren, were financially comfortable. The High School has always been known for its academic excellence, sending a high percentage of students to college. I got good grades, was President of the Chess Club, and would attend Brown University (see attached picture from the Rochester Democrat & Chronicle whose caption, alas, captures my adolescent experience.)

In this reflective essay, I explore how this socio-economic played a strong role in my adolescent identity formation. The prevailing and dominant attitudes or norms, somewhat influenced by the Judaic traditional of scholarship, were that adolescents
would primarily focus on, and put forth serious effort into, their schoolwork and related activities. The overall culture climate, again partially a factor of the large Jewish population, was relatively conservative socially and religiously, producing a muted version of the adolescent model of sex and drugs, rock and roll.

Sex

Late physical maturation marked my perception of the early years of adolescence, particularly ages 13 – 15. According to Lawrence Steinberg (2008), the normal range for the sequence of physical changes at puberty is growth of pubic hair, 10-15, body growth 10 ½ - 16, growth of penis and change in voice, 11 – 14 ½. In each case, I was on the tether end of the scale. I was at least several inches in height below the average; I remember not seeing the most visible signs of sexual maturity until 15. Throughout adolescence, my growth was gradual rather than in spurts. I continued to become taller in the summer before college/first year, the same period that my wavy hair became completely curly.

Describing the psychological and social impact of early or late maturation, Sternberg notes:

Adolescents who mature relatively early or relatively late stand apart from their peers physically and may, as a consequence, elicit different sorts of reactions from those around them. Moreover, individual adolescents may be all too aware of whether they are early or late relative to their age-mates. (45)

I, too, was painfully aware of late maturation. I tried to mask what I felt to be a high voice. I was relieved that my high school had eliminated showers after gym class. Fortunately, I was considered “cute,” even good-looking, nor abnormally formed. As such, I was never particularly bullied or singled out, but my noticeably youngish appearance tended to cast me, socially, as a non-entity.
One experience stands out. I joined Little League baseball for the first time late, at 13. I was placed in an 11-year-old league. It turned out I had skill; I remember hitting the first practice pitch I saw over the centerfielder’s head. I became our team’s ace pitcher, shortstop and clean-up batter. I was the only participant chosen to play the entire All Star game (a grainy film still exists, recently digitalized). The next year, and the one after, I was put in a 13-15 league. There, cast against larger boys, my slow physical development became painfully obvious. I was never allowed to pitch and usually relegated to the outfield. (I did later write an A paper for an English class about the episode which was not quite compensation for my disappointment.)

In his discussion on adolescent egocentrism, Sternberg defines the adolescent’s “imaginary audience” – having a heightened sense of self-consciousness [whereby] the teenager imagines that his or her behavior is the focus of everyone else’s attention” – and the “personal fable” – the adolescent’s “egocentric (and erroneous belief that his or her experiences are unique.”(65-66) I don’t recall exactly feeling unique; I knew and saw other late maturing boys. Nonetheless, I never discussed the situation of late maturation with other boys, and not really with anyone, hence reinforcing the mistaken self-perception of feeling somewhat alone in my personal narrative.

In retrospect, I see that the issue of late maturation would probably have been more consequential in a different socio-cultural milieu. As Sternberg says:

Young people’s reactions to the changes brought on by puberty, and others’ reactions to them, are influenced by the broader social environment, in which messages about physical attractiveness, sexuality and sexual maturation change, often markedly, from era to era. (39)

Fortunately for me, in Brighton’s academically-focused and culturally conservative environment of the late 70s and early 80s, relatively less emphasis was placed on the
trappings of social and sexual "success" with the opposite gender.

As Sternberg observes in "Pubertal Maturation and Peer Relationships:"

Boys and girls who are physically mature are more likely than less mature age-mates to be involved in cross-sex romantic activities such as having a boyfriend or girlfriend or going out on dates, although this depends on the social norms of the adolescent's peer group and the prevailing expectations about the age at which teenagers should begin dating. (44)

In my peer group, consisting mainly of boys and a handful of girls, almost nobody, late or early maturers, actively engaged in serious, extended (or satisfying) cross-sex romantic activities.

During junior and senior years, only one of my close friends could definitely be said to have a girlfriend, although whether consummated their relationship in high school was murky. Only one boy, could make a strongly credible case that he had lost his virginity—during a drunken Model United Nations weekend at Harvard University. (Perhaps not surprisingly, the rebel actually went to Hollywood after college and sold several lucrative movie screenplays.)

Prom night consisted of about 12 guys hanging out with one girl, whose parents were out of town. Entertainment revolved wedging and exploding M-80s inside a stuffed toy squirrel. Ultimately, given the collective low expectations and hopes of my peer group, I was spared many of the identity-undermining consequences of being labeled a sexual or social loser.

As a future educator, when comparing eras, I can only conclude that the adolescent of today has far more—almost a quantum leap—exposure to sex and dating, real or virtual. Empirically, we know that adolescents, especially girls, are becoming physically mature at younger ages and that teens are having sex at younger ages. (In some
settings, the idea that one went to college to lose ones virginity would seem quaint and far-fetched.) Ideally, I think my upbringing in a culturally conservative environment can be an asset if I can communicate, without preaching or bemoaning some lost, simpler time, the real responsibilities and potential consequences that come with adolescent dating and sexual activities.

Religion

I was born into a highly secular family. My father’s parents were Ukrainian Jews who immigrated to the United States in the first decades of the twentieth century. Their formal religious practices were very limited; my father barely recalls visiting a synagogue nor did he have a Bar Mitzvah. My mother’s side was, nominally, German and Irish Protestant. They, too, had only passing experience with institutionalized religion; at some points, my paternal grandfather openly espoused atheism. Never attending church or temple, my upbringing was one of non-observance and humanistic agnosticism.

The educational theorist James Gee (2006) describes cultural discourse as an identity kit, which comes “complete with the appropriate costume and instructions on how to act and talk so as to take on a particular role that others would recognize.” (257) In my case, my identity kit was only partially equipped. To society, I often would be seen as Jewish, but I lacked the full cultural literacy to play the part.

On the one hand, the self-identification I had tended more toward a Jewish, rather than a Christian, orientation. Early on, I was aware of my connection to a minority group with a unique and tragic history (especially given the pogroms and the Holocaust) and a set of socially “inherited” stereotypes or ascribed behaviors. Intellectually, I felt a certain affinity towards thinkers and creators like Marx, Freud and Woody Allen. On the other
hand, what I missed, however, was a learned, self-conscious knowledge of mainstream Judaism. That is, I did not acquire—in the home or in the synagogue—much knowledge of the rules, religion and traditions of the faith. I did not learn Hebrew (or Yiddish). I did not know the significance of various Holidays and rituals. My understanding of the biblical and pre-biblical history of the Jewish people was dim at best. We celebrated Christmas (although when my grandparents were alive, I was more than happy to also receive Hanukah gifts.)

In was in Middle and High School that the question of my Jewish identity probably first became a self-conscious issue. When I was 12 or 13, several of my friends began preparing for their Bar Mitzvahs. I watched them attend extra Sunday school sessions and endure the rigorous task of memorizing passages from the Torah. The first Bar Mitzvah was that of Brian Schultz. I did not have a proper suit; my mother ended up borrowing a truly tack 70’s leisure suit from Brian’s brother. During the ceremony, I felt a little awkward wearing a yarmulke and being unable to follow the Hebrew prayers. The after party was memorable. Brian’s cousin was a comedian from San Diego who specialized in imitating chicken noises. His act brought the crowd to tears of laughter. The next day I politely returned the leisure suit. I attended a few more Bar Mitzvahs before the season was over. I never felt excluded, but always a little uncomfortable if asked about my own (non) ceremony. In the end, the Bar Mitzvahs were not a full-blown moment of spiritual or cultural crisis; I was, however, glad when they were done.

In Eric Toshalis’s research (2008) on adolescent religious orientation, outlined in “A Question of Faith: Adolescent Spirituality in Public Schools”, he argues that adolescent identity formation is often fundamentally informed by issues of belief:
When we work with youths in schools, it may be helpful to remind ourselves that deep concerns often lie underneath their stereotypical surface obsessions with music, clothing, movies, hairstyles, myspace.com, YouTube, and video games. Indeed the developing adolescent is frequently immersed in existential questions... Relationships, habits, lifestyles, and commitments all connect to existential notions that are first grasped with cognitive complexity during adolescence. (190-191)

My own experience—and that of my peers, in this my Jewish peers—matched Toshalis’s description. Throughout adolescence, our relation to Judaism took various forms, whether it be one whose parents were both Jewish and were defining their level of commitment to the faith, or like, myself, those with a mixed or hybrid identity that combined elements of secular Judaism and secular Christianity. Serious reflection was never lacking.

As a future teacher, I want to be especially attuned to the religious questioning/observing of my students. In my Social Foundations class, my final project was on Islamic Education in the United States, including a fieldtrip to the Westfall Academy, an Islamic elementary and middle school located in Brighton. In that project, I gained new appreciation for the issues experienced by a religious group whose members I might teach, but of whose tradition I found myself to be mostly ignorant. At this stage of life, my belief system feels fairly settled. Fundamentally, however, I don’t want to project any sense of “settled beliefs” onto adolescents actively engaged in finding their own.

**School**

School itself is one of the most positive memories of adolescence. I recall almost always enjoying my classes and liking my teachers; academic angst, agony and alienation
were pretty rare. In “Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivations: Classic Definitions and New Directions,” Richard M. Ryan and Edward L. Deci (2000) define intrinsic motivation as “the doing of an activity for its inherent satisfactions rather than for some separable consequences. When intrinsically motivated a person is moved to act for the fun or challenge entailed rather than because of external prods, pressures, or rewards.” (57) In general, their description encapsulates my classroom experience.

My intrinsic interest in learning was guided by my parents who were basically intellectuals. In childhood and early adolescence, I remember my favorite topic was military history. I devoured books on the subject and was thrilled when my parents took me to Europe to tour the famous battlefields of World War One and Two. These and other interests continued throughout high school.

Within the context of developmental and educational practices, Ryan and Reci highlight three core elements: competence, relatedness, and autonomy. I was fortunate that my high school learning environment foster the first two and, to a reasonable degree, the latter. According to Ryan and Reci, feelings of competence “can enhance intrinsic motivation for that action because they allow satisfaction of [a] basic psychological need.” (57) While I was relatively quite in the classroom (partially as a result of self-perceptions of social awkwardness and backwardness), I always did well on tests and grades.

The concept of relatedness is probably the most salient. Reci and Ryan state that “because extrinsically motivated behaviors are not inherently and thus initially interesting and thus must initially be externally prompted, the primary reason people are likely to be willing to do the behaviors is that they are valued by significant others to whom they feel
(or would like to feel) connected whether that be a family, a peer group, or a society.” (64)
Fortunately, in Brighton High School there was a critical mass of students with relatively
high intrinsic motivation, and teachers glad to have them. Class discussion was lively;
extra curriculars like the newspaper, literary magazine, student government, model
United Nations, math and chess clubs flourished. In retrospect, the component of
autonomy is probably far from sufficient in almost all adolescent experience, negative
described by Reci and Ryan: “Not only tangible rewards, but also threats, deadlines, and
competition pressure diminish intrinsic motivation because people experience them as
controllers of their behavior.” (58) For me, the clearest example was AP Physics. I did
not want to take the class, but because of a perceived need to be well-rounded for the
college entrance process, I soldiered on, somehow received a 3 on the test, and promptly
forgot everything. Today, I would not say that I harbor any dislike towards physics, but
the external anxiety of the final test tested my enthusiasm.

In Denise Clark Pope’s (2001) “Doing School:” How We Are Creating a
Generation of Stressed Out, Materialistic, and Miseducated Students, she paints a
nostalgic portrait of her high school days, the same era as my own:

My memories of high school in the early 1980s abound with such moments of
passion and engagement. Though I experienced my strongest feelings in English
class . . . I also remember enjoying subjects in my science and history classes. I
spent hours with friends pondering existential questions that emerged from our
studies, such as the limits of free will and the origins of life. I remember how
earnest we were in these conversations . . . We had learned to love learning and
the excitement that accompanied it. (Preface, xi)

At the risk of looking through a rose-hued lens, my recollections match Pope’s. Harold
Pollack and I had a half-decade of heated political debate. (He was then a conservative
who, ironically, “converted” and now works for a liberal think tank at the University of

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Chicago.) Andre Marquis forever defended nuclear power no many how many facts I had marshaled for my junior year research. (Maybe now I might agree with him.) Dan Rosen and I made home movies. (Including the classic, *Couch Monster*, about a mad scientist who accidentally pours life giving serum on a couch rather than the corpse. Only seeking sympathy and friendship, the couch terrifies its neighbors who finally massacre it with garden tools.) On my front porch, we even held so-called Salons where we smoked cigars, sipped cognac (the drinking age was 18) and pretended to be French Philosphes.

In contrast to the stressed out, materialistic and misguided generation analyzed by Pope, I honestly do not remember anywhere near the degree of competitive and intense pressure for the perfect GPA, the perfect SAT score and entrance into the perfect university. As I compare my adolescence with the generation of today, I am concerned about the social and economic pressure for achievement that can feel sterile.

As recently as 1998, Brighton High School climbed to 5th in national rank; no doubt those students were noticeably stressed out. Empirically, we know that more and more students are going to college and in the last twenty five years college costs have skyrocketed well beyond the overall inflation rate. At the more academically rigorous schools, high school, replete with more standardized tests, has become a far more high stakes arena, a miniature first year of college.

**College**

In this reflection, I have focused on High School. Fortunately, college helped me overcome many of the feeling of adolescent awkwardness and even, to a degree, painful self-consciousness. In college, freed from a personal fable, I become more comfortable
socially. Finally, I lost my virginity. (Actually, it was with a Brighton High School girl during the summer home after the first year. She and I never met again for twenty-five years, until serendipitously and happily, we reconnected on match.com.) Academically, I never had full confidence nor usually received outstanding grades, but I did feel intrinsically motivated. As a teacher, I hope to share my experience with students that life after high school will be a time of growth and self-development, keeping in mind the anxiety of the late physical maturer.

2010 and Beyond

As part of this reflection, I have tried to imagine how I could relate my adolescent experience of the 70s and 80s to that of the 10s, to students whose backgrounds might be both similar and different from my own. For example, if I were to teach at Brighton High School, I would no doubt work with students from familiar life trajectories... (My friend , a BHS alum, is sending his children through the Brighton school system. He says, “It’s pretty much the same, except more Asian kids,” adding that his 11th grade daughter has not even come close to a formal date.) There, I am sure my experience would be beneficial. Fundamentally, however, it is with students from different backgrounds that reflection on my own is most valuable. I want to be the teacher who reminds himself that he was fortunate to come of age in a generally positive learning environment that was socio-economically advantaged and able to foster competence, relatedness and the satisfaction of intrinsic interests. I want to be the teacher who does not project his own identity—with all the complexities and problematic of class, sex and religion—onto his students. To do so risks alienation, frustration and a failure of communication and imagination.


Humanities/Social Sciences/Languages.