

Are our youth free to speak out?

Nov 17, 2013 by Daniel J. Bauer

The Taiwan Fund for Children and Families released the results of a survey this week in which more than 1,000 local junior and senior high school students participated. The topic of the survey sounds awfully grown-up: freedom of expression. Media reported that up to 70 percent of the teens felt they were “unable to make a difference to society because they are not free to speak out.”

The same report referred to a Taiwanese saying that children should have ears, but not mouths, effectively advising them to be silent. The fewer questions asked, the adage argues, the better. By implication, the fewer opinions we hear from young people, the better.

Our first reaction that report could well be ho-hum in capital letters. So high school students on the young or older side - - remember, they're not even in university yet - - feel silenced. So, ho hum, what else is new and, by the way, what's wrong with that?

The continuous flow of learning however that connects middle-teen years with university education cannot be chopped (as if with a meat cleaver) into convenient segments. It is crucial that we allow high school students to follow their interests and explore their own minds. And it is important for us and for them that we on the older side of life listen to what those interests and explorations may be.

Whenever questions about youth and learning arise, I can't help but recall what was happening in my life when I was a teenager. A war was raging in Vietnam, demonstrations against it were spreading like dandelions on college campuses all over the United States, and people only two or three years older than me were putting their future careers and often their very lives on the line in a Quixotic effort to speak their minds. That historic era of unparalleled youthful self-expression in my original country had everything to do with who I am today.

Closer to my heart at that time than questions about politics and Asia were questions about fundamental human decency toward black Americans, voting rights, and battles in general against discrimination wherever it was evident, toward blacks, Hispanics, Asians, anyone. By my freshman year in college, I felt a deep aversion against prejudice and violence

against anyone simply because of who they were born to be.

My life's work here in Taiwan was only a dream, but in my senior year in college I had the good fortune to study under Dr. Imagawa, an exchange professor from Nanzan University in Japan. During those same days, I met for the first time in person a missionary priest I'd been writing to for years here in Taiwan. His name was Father Bartley Schmitz, and he was dedicating his life to hospital ministry in Taiwan.

I quickly took to Dr. Imagawa. He showed me that a learned man from a distant and fascinating culture could make a lasting impact upon his foreign students. He gave me something in my college education that his “American” colleagues of a majority nationality were unable to give me.

If you had told me at the age of 22 that Imagawa's courses in an Asian language and comparative literature were to literally change my life, I'd have laughed and suggested you make an appointment with a good psychiatrist.

My mentor Father Schmitz was a far greater missionary “shen-fu” than I could ever be, and God bless him for it. I often wonder, without his letters back to me as a high school student (“Dear Father, hello, what's the weather like in Taiwan?”), would I be here today?

So here we have this survey. We know a wide margin of our teenagers feel the amalgam of family, school and society offers too little opportunity for them to speak for themselves. They've got roads to explore with words and ideas popping around in their heads, but do we want to hear what those words and ideas are?

On occasion, perhaps we older folks should tell ourselves that we have ears as well as mouths. On occasion, we need not to tell our younger friends what is on our minds, but to ask them what is on theirs.

At the tender age now of 65, as I look at so called big people and big voices in society, education, religion and politics, this issue of providing channels for our younger friends to express themselves seems increasingly urgent to me. (Father Daniel J. Bauer SVD is a priest and associate professor in the English Department at Fu Jen Catholic University.)

Talking points :

1. A recent survey says that 70% of over 1,000 high school students in Taiwan feel they are "silenced," that their parents and teachers and society want them to be quiet and listen, and not to express their own views. Do you feel this survey is accurate? Does the 70% figure surprise you?
2. Now you are a Fu da university student and your life may be somewhat different than it was when you were in high school. Do you feel now that must be "silent" and listen? Do you have enough freedom to express yourself?
3. If you could give advice to high school students in Taiwan on "silence" and "self-expression," what would you say to them?

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