BOOK REVIEWS

A Tribe Apart: A Journey into the Heart of American Adolescence

Having written for years about the dramatic and sensational stories of adolescents, journalist Patricia Hersch felt that 'something was askew' between the adult and media perceptions of adolescents and the lives she encountered among her own teenage children and their friends. The 'fabric of adolescence itself had changed,' she observes. What appeared on the surface to be the adolescence she remembered, upon closer inspection, was something altogether different. That difference is indicated by the central metaphor of the title: contemporary adolescents: forsaken, forgotten or ignored by adults, have banded together as their own tribe, a tribe apart from meaningful relational connections with the adult world.

To research her 'journey into the heart of American Adolescence' Hersch befriended and interviewed eight adolescents over a period of six years (1992-1998). 'My idea was simple,' she writes, 'A lone adult wanderer, I would enter into the adolescent world, get to know it on its own terms, and tell representative stories of growing up from the points of view of eight kids.' The eight students, ostensibly 'regular' and 'mainstream,' were selected across a spectrum of age, race, gender, religious and socio-economic background from her hometown of Reston, Virginia. A suburb of Washington D.C., Reston is billed as 'every-town U.S.A.,' though it might more accurately be called a typical upper-middle-class U.S. suburb.

The book is divided into three parts that manifest Hersch's strategy of getting to know these adolescents in their own contexts. Part I, 'Stepping Inside,' chronicles her observations from a distance. Part II, 'Making Contact,' describes Hersch's journey walking with and listening to students as they journey through the 'kaleidoscope of adolescence.' In Part III, 'Making Sense,' she seeks to join with them in their journey in order to 'make sense' of their behaviours and to 'move forward.' As she wrestles with adolescents with whom she has a significant relationship she observes that kids are 'simply more complex than we could ever
imagine.’ The ‘making sense’ is not so much prescriptive as it is helping kids to be descriptive of their situation in order to make healthier, meaningful choices.

This structure I found to be useful in the classroom setting. It provides a laboratory of where students can enter into the adolescent world. The three sections can serve as a paradigm of a relational, incarnational ministry of presence: observe, listen, journey with. If it is true that ministry is not so much ‘taught as it is caught,’ A Tribe Apart provides an opportunity to walk with students as you both walk with the adolescents in the book. Almost every page of the journey reveals some issue or topic ripe for theological and philosophical reflection about adolescent culture and ministry.

One minor wish was for a greater exploration of the religious dimension of these kids’ lives, though it is not entirely absent. Young Life is mentioned in passing, a Catholic youth group provides some support. ‘Joan’ (all the names are pseudonyms) even has a formative experience of forgiveness at a two thousand students ‘church retreat...about teenage life’ where they had ‘lots of cool music’ and were ‘not preachy.’ To be fair, it is hard to say whether religion is slighted, or that these individuals simply had little or no connection with any organized religion.

Hersch, in my estimation, has given the field of Adolescent culture and ministry a significant gift. Granted, this book is about adolescence in the U.S., but I suspect that anyone who works with kids will recognize the universal themes of identity formation, the struggle for independence while still desiring familial connection, and the variety of ways of responding to and participating in contemporary adolescent culture. Though not an expressed goal in her ostensibly secular story, she herself is an illustration for youth workers of an incarnational relational ministry. For parents and interested adults she has provided an accurate picture of contemporary adolescence. She is insightful, compassionate, self-critical of our own adult world; she neither sugarcoats nor sensationalises as she recounts all the joys and sorrows, triumphs and tragedies. Her heart for these kids is contagious; you can’t help but care for them, wanting them to survive and thrive.

Hersch concludes with a clarion call that youth workers of all variety are seeking to heed: ‘Listen to the kids...We have to reconnect the adolescent community to ours. It is not so hard. We just need to reach out and embrace them and take the time to get to know them—one by one, as individuals, not a tribe.’ And