This Too Shall Pass

At age sixteen, I wasn’t what you’d call the ‘good child,’ you know, the model daughter, the one my parents worked so hard to raise. Yeah, not so much. Despite their best efforts—the sticker chore-charts and ‘I Can Be Good’ books as a kid, the weekly church attendance throughout high school, and the fancy dinners honoring good grades and behavior—at sixteen I just reached the point where I didn’t want to listen. I wanted to make mistakes. I knew I was going to make mistakes. And that was okay by me. My parents would tell me one thing and I’d do the complete opposite, just to prove them wrong. Just to say I could do it on my own—bad or good. I convinced myself that making my own mistakes was the only way to learn… though it would’ve been a lot easier to just listen to what they told me instead of repeating similar choices and getting the same consequences. It wasn’t that I wanted to spite my parents or anything like that. At least that’s what I tell myself now. As a teenager, I just felt that I learned all I could from them and I wanted to experience the world on my own. Or as ‘on my own’ as a sixteen-year-old who is still completely dependent on her parents financially, lives in their house, eats their food, and has them do her laundry can be.

When I think ‘teenager,’ I think of my high school years, the period between childhood and adulthood—that awkward phase of not being a little kid anymore, but still being too reliant on everyone else to get through anything solo. It’s those crazy, chaotic years of development. But not just the growth spurts and the ugly pimples; much of the teen years
is about biological and emotional changes—the surge of hormones and how they shift beliefs, decisions, and ways of thinking.

In my freshman year of college, I took a psychology class titled Human Growth and Development, which focused on people’s life changes. It was an interesting class because for the first time I realized that

1. An adolescent’s mind is biologically altered during the teenage years and
2. My parents probably weren’t as bad as I imagined

Of the wealth of psychologists and information we studied that semester, three names have stayed with me: G. Stanley Hall, Anna Freud, and Erik Erikson. Hall is the psychologist that coined the term ‘sturm and drang’ or ‘storm and stress’ which basically explains what being a teen is all about. ‘Storm and stress’ is the surge of emotions: when you’re lovey-dovey and holding hands with a high-school sweetheart one minute, and the next minute screaming at him, demanding to read every single text message sent in the last month… not that I ever did that or anything.

Hall believed that teenagers were on a continual emotional rollercoaster. In his words, “giddy one moment and depressed the next, apathetic today and impassioned tomorrow,” thus completely validating my teenage freak outs. He was one of the first psychologists that actually began to, and wanted to, understand what being an adolescent was all about. His studies laid a foundation for other psychologists, particularly Anna Freud,

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who piggy-backed off of Hall’s ideas, then developed her own theory of adolescence that, following in her father’s footsteps, was largely sexual.

Anna Freud characterized adolescence as “a period of internal conflict, psychic disequilibrium, and erratic behavior”.¹ With this definition, she focused on the idea that adolescent ‘chaos’ was due to the increase of sexual hormones in puberty. She also believed that adolescent relationships, sexual development, and the awareness of the opposite sex led to turmoil as well as selfishness. Which, I mean, I can understand. Looking back, at least half of my time was spent obsessing over my appearance, and the other half was spent obsessing over boys. I was largely selfish, or ‘egocentric,’ as Freud would say. I thought I was the center of the universe. If there was a party to attend, it just made sense for my mother to abandon the half-prepared chicken dinner and drive me to a friend’s house. If I wanted to go to the mall, it was just logical that I would skip the family luncheon—duh, I could eat mall food—and my dad could just leave the golf outing with his work buddies early to pick me up. No problem. Freud said it was because of this hormonally-altered egocentrism that teenagers are often over-emotional and rash in their responses, decisions, and relationships.¹ Which does make sense. Though I’m not sure claiming Freud’s theory as an excuse for my sixteen-year-old behavior would have worked on my parents. Or work even now.

The third psychologist I remember from my college class was Erik Erikson, one whose name I’ve known since I was fifteen. Back in my junior year of high school, I was encouraged by a counselor to explore my interests and potential future careers. I took a survey based on studies by Erikson, studies that focused on independence and identity—
what Erikson felt were the two most important components of adolescence. I remember sitting in front of that fuzzy computer screen in the counselor’s office, answering questions like ‘Would you enjoy going on a walk outside?’ (well, of course) and ‘Do issues of the environment concern you?’ (obliged to say yes no matter what). The questions were yes or no, and focused largely on interests and how they relate to jobs. Though I’m still not sure how relevant these questions were in determining my personal career path… especially considering the fact that I answered most of them ‘yes’ because I didn’t want my counselor to judge me. Nevertheless, the study is still widely known for its success and Erikson is still hugely popular for his contribution to adolescent research.

One of the major things that Erikson focused on was psychosocial moratorium, or the search for social identity. Adolescence is the experimental period—trying different roles and finding one’s place. Even if those roles aren’t so good…like being a bad ass and sneaking out past curfew…and then getting caught a week later when your parents read about it in your diary. Positive or negative, Erikson was an advocator of finding one’s self (even through the rough parts). He believed that an adolescent who failed to find an identity would experience both ‘self-doubt and role confusion’ which in turn would lead to stress.¹ And I guess, in some ways, I see this in myself. In high school having a ‘place’ really did matter. It wasn’t so much the stereotypical Mean Girls popularity contest, but it was definitely of utmost importance to find a group of friends that thought I was cool, find clothes that didn’t make me look fat, and, of course, find the love of my life. Because finding the love of your life is something that’s destined to happen in high school. And you could say I got stressed too.
Stressed when my friend group shunned me for making out with a girl’s Homecoming date a week before the dance—not one of my better moments. And stressed when my first boyfriend of two weeks broke up with me. That was devastating.

Research backing Erikson’s theory explains that a typical teenager has many biological changes during adolescence: an increase in the secretion of thyroid and adrenal hormones; the growth of the frontal, temporal, and parietal cortexes and lobes; and the modification of the limbic system, the brain’s emotional control center.\(^1\) Stress-causing chaos. Basically what all that means is that biologically, a teenager is going through a lot. Changes in the limbic system explain rash judgment-making, quick-temperedness, and rebellion. Hormone increases that shift pleasure-seeking areas of the brain explain changes in motivation.\(^2\) And on top of all of this, parts of the brain are actually working to make the teenager smarter—spatial reasoning is increased through the parietal lobe, the frontal lobe develops higher-order thinking and reasoning, and the temporal lobe works with language and nonverbal skills.\(^3\) It’s a lot going on, and stressful too, but the changes are vital for adulthood.

As a newly-twenty-one-year-old, I can finally say (with a certainty I definitely didn’t have at sixteen) that I am independent…well…maybe not *fully* independent… but definitely my own person. Looking back, I truly believed that I knew everything. I mean, I knew how

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to write a three-prong thesis statement and how to long-divide without a calculator (a skill that has slowly but surely deteriorated in the last four years). And at sixteen, I even knew how to fold laundry and fill a car with gas, so obviously I knew everything.

As a high school sophomore, I wanted nothing more than to be my own person: to do things by myself, to learn all I could, to push the boundaries even. I was emotional, yes. I still am. Though that’s hard to admit looking back and even harder to admit now. At sixteen, I could be watching a love movie and smiling at all the wonderful, ‘Cinderella-story’ scenes. Then, in a matter of minutes, I’d be bawling, throwing dirty tissues at the screen. I could want nothing more than to be around all my friends, and then seconds later I’d want to curl up in a ball in my room. I don’t think I’m that bad anymore… though my boyfriend might disagree. Most of all though, I wanted to rebel. I wanted to make my own mistakes, take reckless chances, go past the limits. Sure, maybe it wasn’t the best plan. And sure, it would have been a hell of a lot easier to learn from those older than me. But then it wasn’t truly my experience.

It wasn’t until that Human Growth and Development class that I realized being a teenager is kind of crazy, but we all go through it. It was an eye-opener to those terrible nights of wondering why my parents hated me; it was an eye-opener realizing my parents probably never hated me at all. Well, maybe not as much as I thought they did. I hope.

At twenty-one, I still don’t have everything figured out. I can now bake a mean enchilada casserole, color-code my laundry, and pay a credit card bill, but ask me where to find each of the fifty states…and I’ll have to use a map. There’s still a lot left to learn.
Now that I’m a year from college graduation, I can look back on my high school years and laugh. And hopefully my parents can too…after they get over the initial wanting to wring my neck. Sometimes that’s all you can do—look back and laugh. And, of course, burn that diary that got you grounded your junior year. Rule number one: always delete the evidence.

When I think about the person I’ve become, I’m proud. Sure, not everything has been admirable. But I learned from those moments: the good, and more importantly, the bad. One of the interesting parts of growing up is realizing that like all things in life, the bad will pass. It’s just hard going through it. But the teen years, with all their biological and hormonal growths and changes, are just a phase. A temporary period. Thank goodness for that.
References

