

This work is an exploration of restlessness and what it means to transcend fixed models of identity. I researched psychological as well as socioeconomic factors that contribute to restlessness in young people. As a child, I was in constant motion; as I grew up, the source of my restlessness became more abstract. Through the artistic journey, I sought to: find the source of my own desperate need for change; figure out ways to channel restless energy; and surpass perceived limits set by my environment, myself, and others.

These prints of hair being cut symbolize my refusal of others' perceptions of my identity. I reflected on the ways in which I cyclically block my own path in fear of making the wrong decision. I was drawn to printmaking, but at first hesitated because I was not sure if it was the *right* decision. I chose the medium as almost an act of defiance against my usual, frustrating roadblocks. Printmaking is an entirely new medium to me, and the process of making these prints taught me a great deal about both the medium and myself. Most options are the right decision if you give them a chance to be.

This work explores my discomfort with my identity; I have felt consistently stagnant, despite efforts to continue growing and changing. This progression depicts my restlessness and the Printmaking medium marks an example of myself making a decision to step out of a cycle that has been simultaneously comfortable and constraining.

Meghan

# Stagnation, Discomfort, and Restlessness

Meghan



I have always considered change to be a quite necessary part of my life. Even when I was much smaller, I addressed this need for shifts in my environment by completely reorganizing my bedroom approximately once a month. I would make a day of pulling the books off my shelves, the mattress off my bed, the drawers out of my dresser, and reassembling them bit by bit as my small, shared room took its newest form. My younger sister grew accustomed to this; I was in a perpetual state of motion. As I grew older, in many aspects, I learned how to be more still, but this inner restlessness manifested itself in different ways. It became less about my physical surroundings and more about less tangible concepts. One of these concepts was identity - I was increasingly discontented with the thought of people seeing me as the same version of myself that I was a year, a month, or even a week ago. I began to channel my energy into constant reinvention, doing my best to ensure that nobody could attempt to define me by my physical appearance as long as I was yet unable to define myself. This led to a personal quest to find this definition of self, and I began to realize all of the ways in which I was limited in doing so - by not only the boxes I felt I had found myself in but the lack of ability I saw myself having to transcend the boundaries of the small town I had grown up in. I grew increasingly fixed on surpassing all foreseeable limits. When I began to explain this to others as restlessness, I began asking myself lots of questions - what is restlessness? Why am I feeling so restless? How can I channel this restlessness into something progressive and worthwhile?

In my attempts to define restlessness, I started with the very basic dictionary definition of the word: “feeling nervous or bored,” “unhappy about a situation and wanting change,” or “characterized by or manifesting unrest, especially of the mind” (17). Restlessness is described as being anything from mild anxiety and an inability to sit still to something more abstract, a physical discomfort within one’s own body that is difficult to pinpoint or alleviate. According to *Psychology Dictionary*, restlessness is, in its most physical sense, “ceaseless movement or activity without purpose which may be of limited intensity or duration.” The feelings we commonly associate with this physical idea of restlessness - reactions such as tapping feet, pacing or fidgeting - connect to a set of symptoms known as psychomotor agitation (16), which is a physical reaction to anxiety or distress. However, this wasn’t exactly what I was looking for. It is quickly discerned with little research into the definition of restlessness that there are two major ways of looking at it. The first way is as a purely physical response to a purely physical discomfort. The second, less tangible perspective is more abstract, and pertains to a mental state of discomfort, whether within a situation, location, identity, etc. I was interested in combining the two by analyzing the external physical reactions that people, especially adolescents, have to what starts as a more internal state of restlessness - this goes beyond tapping toes. When broadened to a universally applicable definition, the consistent theme is *action stemming from some type of discomfort*. This discomfort can come from an infinite number of possible situations. However, as I had more conversations with people about restlessness, I observed it being especially present in teenagers and young adults. This is not only observable through their actions, but can be seen through studies of the adolescent brain.

Adolescence can be defined as the period of time during which a child’s brain undergoes its transformation into a fully developed adult brain. Contrary to what most believe, adolescence does not just encompass the “teenage years,” but often lasts between the ages of 12 and 24. According to Daniel J. Siegel’s book *Brainstorm: The Power and Purpose of the Teenage Brain*, the common idea of teenage emotions as impulsive and bored resulting from “raging hormones” is inaccurate. Many significant structural changes are occurring in the brain during adolescence that affect thinking and behavior. Understanding these changes is vital to understanding young

people. For one thing, the baseline levels of dopamine (the major chemical in our brains' "reward systems,") are lower in adolescent brains, and the level in which they are released in response to experience is higher. This raised contrast in the way youth experience this chemical means a much more extreme perceived difference between the times when they are and are not having rewarding experiences. This difference explains why adolescents often feel "bored" when not engaged in stimulating activities. Their responses to this boredom align with our previously established definition of restlessness - discomfort experienced when they are unable to seek out immediately rewarding experiences. In addition to this heightened likelihood of restless feelings in the first place, the adolescent brain has a more difficult time with "gist thinking," or thinking abstractly. Specializing in "literal thinking," which means seeing less of the big picture and more of the direct immediate consequences of an action, the adolescent brain places more emphasis on pros than cons. Rather than consider how an action could have long-term consequences, they often consider the short-term pros and cons instead, and in short-term, there are often more positive results in the form of rewarding brain chemicals (20). A combination of these two major neurological features can result in the impulsivity and recklessness that is often associated with teenagers.

As these basic structural changes are happening to the brain, teenagers are also in a very important stage in personality development. Erik Erikson, an American psychologist and psychoanalyst who studied developmental psychology, is perhaps most well-known for coining the phrase "identity crisis." The definition of this relatively well-known phrase is "a period of uncertainty and confusion in which a person's sense of identity becomes insecure, typically due to a change in their expected aims or role in society" (Merriam-Webster's Dictionary). Erikson had many theories about human development, including one of "prolonged adolescence." This idea claims that there exists a period of development between adolescence and adulthood called *emerging adulthood*. Erikson also had a major theory on the development of personality. In summary, an individual's life can be broken into eight stages. In each stage, there are two factors that need to be balanced in order for positive results that lead to overall successful development. For example, in the very first stage of one's life, between the ages of 0 and 18 months, these two combatting factors are basic trust and basic mistrust. Erikson believed that this relies on mothering, and can result in hope when properly balanced. The stage that we consider adolescence was stage 5 in Erikson's theory of personality. He refers to the two factors in this time that need to be balanced as "identity vs. role confusion." This is the time to ask questions such as "who am I? How do I fit in? Where am I going?" Erikson said that a balance between these things would ultimately result in fidelity, but relies on parents of these adolescents allowing their children to conclude their own identities rather than pushing them to conform (12). The issue of identity is hugely relevant in young people. Watch nearly any movie geared toward teenagers and you are likely to see plots in which teens experiment with new identities, themes of the road to self-acceptance and identity crises. Especially today, with social media providing a platform to cultivate images that represent us, it is a task to make sure that this image is not only an accurate representation of who we feel we are, but also one we are proud to stand behind. This concept, however, does transcend modern technology. Erikson's studies prove that issues of identity have been prevalent in the minds of teenagers long before the internet was even conceived. As the dramatic transition is made from childhood to adulthood, it is common to find discomfort in others' perceptions of you. Your changing identity can mean that the person you feel like inside outgrows the version of you that exists in the minds of people who have known you for awhile. This happens more quickly than they can recognize and adapt to these

differences, and this often leaves feelings of restlessness related to identity unresolved. Factors outside of our internal conflicts with our individual identities, however, also contribute to these feelings of being stuck. As our identities are sometimes not changing quickly enough for our liking, sometimes the world around us isn't either. Our surroundings often have ways of limiting movement, and sometimes there is only so much growing that a person can do without pushing their environment to do the same.

In our modern world, there are many socioeconomic factors putting pressure on the youth. Population booms have recently and are continuing to create need for jobs much more rapidly than employment opportunities are being created. As a result, roughly 40% of the world's unemployed are youths. 85% of these youths live in emerging, developing, or conflict-affected regions (18). Economic marginalization has significant effects on youth physically and mentally. Poverty remains, and from it blooms inequality and social divisions. According to a *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* article, "in cities and advanced economies, educated, connected and social media savvy youths have greater expectations, bigger demands and an ability to mobilize and grow their networks quickly to challenge the status quo." Poverty and unemployment limit opportunities for young people, as well as limit their spaces for expression, both personally and civically. All of these factors can contribute to people feeling powerless and stuck, and these feelings can go one of two ways. The first way is the way of crime, gangs, prostitution and, in the most extreme cases, participation in terrorist groups. Such networks target vulnerable youths who are feeling angry, powerless and excluded. When unable to make changes peacefully but also unwilling to remain in a place of discomfort, activism can turn violent. However, the alternate route this frustration can take is the route of positive movements.

Looking back to the civil rights movement, Martin Luther King Jr. was only 25 years old when he inspired people to fight for equal rights, and affected great change that we still see the results of today. In more recent events, Malala Yousafzai was only 14 when the Taliban began attacking girls at her school in Pakistan, and she became an advocate for girls' education in her country. She blogged anonymously about this issue for BBC, but when her identity was revealed, the Taliban came for her as she was taking the bus home from school. She was shot in the head, and after surviving, remained a spokesperson for the issues she was passionate about. At the age of 17, she became the youngest person ever to win a Nobel Peace Prize (10). Look to the forefront of nearly any social movement, and you will see young people there. The restlessness that is consistently present in young people is not only fueled by these socioeconomic limitations but, in turn, this restlessness fuels action. However, social movements are not simply meaningless outlets for teenage restlessness - many issues that are being protested pertain to a much wider demographic than adolescents. So why are young people consistently observable at the forefront? Does there come a point when people outgrow their desire for change, or become content with settling for discomfort?

There are features of adolescent thinking that differ from mature brains, and these could explain where teenage restlessness goes as an individual reaches adulthood. In his book, Siegel referred to four "cardinal qualities" of the adolescent brain - novelty seeking, social engagement, increased emotional intensity, and creative exploration. The maturation of the brain results in a growing distance from these qualities. As people emerge on the other side of adolescence, their need to seek novelty fades, and they become comfortable with stagnation. Emotional intensity decreases, need for constant social engagement fades, and creative exploration is seen as less necessary as the brain stops moving forward in its development. One of the many results of this can take the form of a generational gap. In the recent 2016 presidential election, the divide



necessarily the big move itself which enabled this realization, I don't believe that the size of the box my comfort zone was in could have fit more growth. I was feeling uncomfortable with being so perpetually comfortable, and so I needed to step outside of familiarity. Analyzing the reasons behind restlessness provoked significant amounts of personal analysis as well - I realized that I am most restless about the things that I am in the process of understanding, primarily myself (*identity*). Learning more about where these feelings come from and how they operate has served the dual function of enabling these understandings and harnessing this restlessness in a productive way.

## Bibliography:

- Boeree, George C. *Erik Erikson, 1902-1994*. Shippensburg University. 2006. Web. 06 Dec. 2016
- Brook, Pete. "Restless Nights Inspire Artist's Spectral Photos." *Wired*. Conde Nast, 23 Mar. 2012. Web. 06 Dec. 2016.
- Damon, William. "The Young and the Restless." *Hoover Institution*. Board of Trustees of Leland Stanford Junior University, 2016. Web. 13 Nov. 2016.
- Dibou, Tanja. "A Discussion of Youth Civic Activism: Screening Concepts and Levels of Youth Engagement." *Academia.edu*. Academia, 2023. Web. 06 Dec. 2016.
- Fabian, Erika. "Hands." *Erika Fabian*. Wordpress.com, 2011. Web. 06 Dec. 2016.
- "Generalized Anxiety Disorder and Treatment Newport Beach, CA." *Generalized Anxiety Disorder \* Restlessness Feeling on Edge, Fatigue, Irritability*. Anxiety and Depression Center, n.d. Web. 13 Nov. 2016.
- Goldin, Nicole. "Young and Restless, Affecting Change." *Young and Restless, and Affecting Change*. The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, 14 Feb. 2015. Web. 13 Nov. 2016.
- Grinspan, Jon. "Anxious Youth, Then and Now." *The New York Times*. The New York Times Company, 31 Dec. 2013. Web. 11 Nov. 2016.
- Kettler, Sara. "Malala Yousafzai." *Bio.com*. A&E Networks Television, 1 July 2016. Web. 14 Nov. 2016.
- Kimball, Gayle. "Why Recent Global Uprisings Are Led by Youth | Heathwood Press." *Heathwood Press*. Heathwood Institute and Press, 25 Apr. 2015. Web. 14 Nov. 2016.
- McLeod, Saul. "Erik Erikson." *Erik Erikson*. Simply Psychology, 2013. Web. 06 Dec. 2016.
- "Moving Art Group." *Moving Art Group*. N.p., 2013. Web. 06 Dec. 2016.
- "Neophile." *Wikipedia*. Wikimedia Foundation, n.d. Web. 13 Nov. 2016.
- Preston, Tammy, MS. "Childhood vs Adult." *AdultADHDnet*. AdultAdhd.net, Apr. 2013. Web. 13 Nov. 2016.
- "Psychomotor Agitation." *Wikipedia*. Wikimedia Foundation, n.d. Web. 06 Dec. 2016.
- "Restless." Def. 1, 2 & 3. *Merriam - Webster's Dictionary*. Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, 1993. Print.

Sarkis, Stephanie, Ph.D. "My Experience Having ADHD/ADD." *Psychology Today*. Sussex Publishers, LLC, 3 Mar. 2010. Web. 13 Nov. 2016.

Schannon, Mark. "How to Combat Restlessness." *Time*. Time, 11 Feb. 2015. Web. 13 Nov. 2016.

Siegel, Daniel J. *Brainstorm: The Power and Purpose of the Teenage Brain*. New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Penguin, a Member of Penguin Group (USA), 2013. Print.

"What Is Restlessness?" *Psychology Dictionary*. Psychology Dictionary, 2016. Web. 06 Dec. 2016.

Whitbourne, Susan Krauss, Ph.D. "Are You a Neophiliac?" *Psychology Today*. Sussex Publishers, LLC, 6 Mar. 2012. Web. 13 Nov. 2016.

Timm, Jane C. "141 Stances on 23 Issues Donald Trump Took during His White House Bid." *NBCNews.com*. NBCUniversal News Group, 28 Nov. 2016. Web. 13 Dec. 2016.