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Preserved in Time

Plaster, paper, string, beeswax

I am very aware that my teenage experience is temporary. Earlier in the semester, I interviewed my peers and asked them about their experiences between the ages of 13 and 19. I used this research to inform my final essay. In my paper, I explore the question, “What is the point of the teenage experience?” and highlight the difficulties many face while trying to answer it.

For my final artwork, I wanted to reflect on my own teenage experiences. During my interviews, I realized the importance of this stage of life. As teenagers, we grow significantly physically, emotionally, and mentally. Although the majority of my teenage years were captured digitally, I feel like preserving and showing my memories physically emphasizes their importance.

To make my sculptural installation, I started by collecting specific mementos. I searched through shoeboxes of keepsakes, looking for positive memories that have shaped my teenage self. I rediscovered hundreds of Polaroid photos and was intrigued by their impermanence. These instant photos are one of the only forms of photography that cannot be changed once the photo has been taken. I read through my old journals and diaries and collected sentences and phrases that I felt defined my teenage self. To capture my physical teenage self I created six plaster casts of my body. I used wax to embed my collected memories onto the casts. I chose wax because I wanted a material that was time-sensitive, similar to my teenage experience. I only had a few moments to push my paper memories onto the plaster sculptures before the wax cooled and created a foggy cloud over them. I decided to drop my sculptures down from the ceiling to create a physical persona with movement and dimension. I encourage you to gently interact with my artwork and explore the teenage memories I have put on display.

The Teenage Experience



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The Oxbow School

OS49

Author's note: Rather than doing traditional research, I sought out teenagers like me to answer my questions. I chose four classmates here at Oxbow who I wanted to get to know on a deeper level. I asked them all specific questions about what it means to be a teenager and what we "should" be achieving during this time. My main questions were broad and I let my interviewees take their time to find their answers. I asked specific follow-up questions to better understand their point of view. Once all four interviews were completed, I transcribed the files. I compiled my list of potential quotes and had each interviewee adjust my choices as needed. Finally, before writing this essay I took away any names or distinguishing information to keep my peers and their lives confidential. The only identifiers left are specific font colors that each interviewee chose for their quotes. This last step was important to me because I recognize that even though my friends told me about their teenage experiences confidently, that does not give me the right to share their stories with anyone who happens across this essay. Regardless, my goal was not to find what one specific teenager has done with their teenage experience, but instead to find overarching themes between the ideas of others and my own.

Interview 1

Run time: 54:04

Pronouns: she/her/hers

She feels most like herself when: "I'm dancing in my room."

Interview 2

Run time: 42:33

Pronouns: he/him/his

He feels most like himself when: "I'm with friends that I feel like I can talk about anything with."

Interview 3

Run time: 42:54

Pronouns: he/him/his

He feels most like himself when: "I'm in my room with a nice, giant, soft blanket wrapped around me."

Interview 4

Run time: 36:24

Pronouns: she/her/hers

She feels most like herself when: "I'm creating art or with people that make me comfortable and bring good memories."

What is the point of being a teenager? I have asked myself this too many times to count over the last few years. Of course, this question implies that we have a choice between going through this phase of life or hitting the fast-forward button until adulthood. I am not alone in wondering what the purpose of these years is. Actually, I think that adults are surrounded by teenagers asking this question so often, that many have committed their time to providing an answer. For example, the adults in my own life all have an opinion on what I should be achieving between the ages of 13 and 19. My dad wants me to prepare for college, my mom wants me to make friends, my teachers want me to get ready for the workforce, my counselors want me to look outstanding on paper, my coaches want me to beat my competitors, my mentors want me to aim higher, my therapist wants me to sleep more. Recently, I realized that the question I should have been asking myself is, “What is the point of the teenage *experience*?” The key difference here is that aging is impersonal and out of our control; whereas, what we make of these years varies widely, and cannot be defined or explained by a single answer.

One of the first things I tried to find during my interviews was the difference between a teenager and a kid. I know that for some people there are limbo stages such as “tween”, but because my research was focused on interpretation rather than age-based grouping I excluded those phases. I asked my interviewees to provide the key markers of being a child (other than age). One recurring answer that I related to was looking at the world with a rose-colored tint. “That’s just being a kid, you don’t really notice what’s going on around you. It’s so blissful and I think I’m always gonna chase that and I’m gonna miss being blissful. But that’s not sustainable.” This obliviousness is what keeps the majority of our childhood memories lighthearted and pure. “I remember being littler in elementary school and not caring what anyone thought of me.” The

loss of these things is often what brings a childhood experience to an end. “I feel like [childhood ends] when innocence is taken away, I think trauma plays into it. And [not doing] normal kid things like being carefree or just not really thinking about the future in such a deep way.”

Traumatic, unfamiliar, or jarring experiences can lead to a worldly awareness that helps speed up the transition into teenagehood. In my own life, I remember my grandparent’s dog dying while visiting them when I was in early middle school. This experience was not life-changing; however, I do mark it as the first time I started to think about the concept of impermanence. Trauma experienced early on can sometimes cut childhood experiences short rather than aiding in a natural transition away from them. “I feel like I have grown up really fast. And even from a young age, I had to grow up really fast. I feel like I’ve been a teenager my whole life which sounds kind of strange. I feel like my childhood ended sooner than it should have and so I’ve been a teenager or even just a young adult for a long time.”

After understanding what my interviewees marked as childhood experiences, I asked them to define teenage traits. In my own life, hitting puberty made me feel older physically, emotionally, and even socially. I remember being 12, writing in my diary about the toils of mood swings and stomach cramps... looking back now I didn’t even know the half of it. “Puberty kind of hit me a little early. I think I was 11. But still, I would consider that the start of my teen years because I feel like puberty is kinda of a big part of that. But yeah, it was overnight.” Changing physically can signify the end of an era as we are growing up.

Another common theme in my interviews was becoming more aware of one’s surroundings. “Being [a teenager has been being] more adventurous, exploring a lot more [and] being more open to risk-taking I would say. And also starting to get really subconscious about yourself and how you’re viewed by other people.” This awareness can be informative but also

destructive. “[Coming] into my teenage years I started to become a lot more self-aware of what

I’m doing. And I would say I felt like a little bit less free in that sense... It was just me getting in my own head as I got older.” Treatment and expectations from others, especially adults, also have lots of influence over how old we feel. “[Being a teenager is] having a lot of responsibility put on you. And I feel like the expectations are higher.” Although I’ve always been the eldest, expectations to entertain, transport, feed, and support my siblings have become standard as I’ve gotten older. Even more than taking care of others, the expectations to be self-sufficient and autonomous have increased exponentially. I can fly by myself, make full meals, drive downtown to go to a concert, and even thrive at a boarding school states away from my family. Yet, I do have to occasionally remind the adults in my life that this is, in fact, my first rodeo.

I asked my interviewees to further explain their takes on aging. Although there are numbers attached to certain phases of life such as baby, toddler, and child, the transition between them does not always feel so distinct. I remember first turning 13 and my parents constantly calling me a teenager but I had not yet felt much different than 12. “When you hit your birthday there’s no physical difference in age. And so I think that age is kind of defined by your experiences and how you mature.” Upon asking my peers, they all related to this experience. Each of them said that growing up is more of a gradual process, rather than switching between abrupt stages of life. “[Growing up is] what I’ve experienced and also how much I can take away from that experience.”

In all four interviews, my respondents stated that one of the most important things for teenagers to do is to better understand themselves. “I still don’t really know what I’m gonna do when I grow up, you know. So I’m just doing me. [I’m] taking in all the information and seeing

what things I like and what things I don't. In that way, I'm kind of finding myself because I'm finding what makes me happy." As children, we learn about the ways of the world. We discover the shadows that our hands can make, the softness of a pet's fur, the taste of a zipper pull-tag between our teeth, and the cadence of someone else's footsteps. As we age out of our childhood, this curiosity turns inward. We explore what traits of ours we push forward and which ones we only show to our closest friends. Through socializing and consuming media, we discover traits in others that we are attracted to and even sometimes want to take on. "For me, I am trying things out still. And then whatever sticks, I'll just add to my repertoire, I guess." I think that the importance of these discoveries is often forgotten. Knowing your likes, dislikes, boundaries, and comfort zones helps prepare you to interact with the world independently. "I have learned that spending time with other people is what makes me feel happy. So I definitely need that even if it drains my social battery sometimes."

Discovering traits about yourself can be enlightening, but also challenging. For many, these are the years when we learn that we are imperfect. "At the end of eighth grade, I got into this really bad, big fight with, at the time, my best friend. I think that fight made me realize these uglier parts of myself. And made me realize that, 'Oh, I'm not necessarily always the greatest person' and that's okay, but you need to acknowledge this. You need to learn and grow from this, instead of being stubborn." We are challenged to grow from these experiences with self-love rather than getting discouraged over our flaws. For the majority of seventh grade, I was content with my circumstances. I had a loud and popular group of friends, a sport where my coaches told me I could win if I tried hard enough, boys that would flirt with me in 4th-period science class, and was spontaneous with what I ate and when I slept. When lockdown began, I was devastated to be pulled out of my typical rhythm. However, by the end

of that summer, I was thankful for the time in solidarity. During those five months, I realized that I was not the person I wanted to be. My friends and I were mean to one another, other students, and especially ourselves. Swim team made me feel self-conscious. I was never genuinely interested in the boys I talked to (I mostly did to entertain my friends). I felt unhealthy and tired all the time. “So I kind of had to explore myself and... had to look at myself from an outside perspective. It helped me to be more aware of myself.” It took a lot of motivation, but by the start of 8th grade I had separated from those friends, promised to treat others with kindness, begun to exercise in ways that made me feel accomplished, come out as queer, and transitioned to a vegan diet. “I believe that I can create my own reality... It’s not my actions that define who I am. It’s who I decide to be that defines who I am.”

All of my interviewees had similar stories regarding parts about themselves that have positively changed during teenagehood. I asked them, “Do our identities have to change as we grow older?” “Yeah, I think so. I feel like growing up in general that just happens. It’s hard to stay the same person because of life experiences, relationships, people, even environments are always changing.” Growing is a part of life, and oftentimes impermanence is the only constant. Many teenagers begin to realize this as they lose contact with old friends, move houses, bury pets, misplace old favorite toys, and age out of the paint color they chose for their room at 11. Due to this, many of us find that one of the only permanently stable things we can implement is the way that we treat ourselves. “I feel like I have no way of knowing if people have accepted me; so instead, I focus on accepting myself.” Self-love and acceptance can be grounding during times of modification. “I feel like when you are confident in who you are, when you have self-love, when you have stability within who you are as a person it makes the things going around you easier to handle and face.”

One of the best ways to learn to love oneself is to be surrounded by loving people. Of course, we do not have control over who enters our lives; we do have control over how they impact us. It is important to seek out people who accept you entirely and people who can encourage you to practice self-assurance. “People that are not judgemental I really like to surround myself with because I feel like I don’t have to hide certain parts of myself or conform to their thoughts and opinions.” It has taken a long time for me to find “my people”, but I do truly believe that a few of my closest friends have permanent spots in my life. Finding these people is often as straightforward as being yourself and seeing who you draw in. “I think we all just find each other.” It is much easier said than done and a skill that most teenagers will not be able to perfect for a while. “I feel like I had been trying to find where I belong for so long, especially at my old school. And it just never worked fully but when I stopped focusing on it that’s when I actually found my people.” It is widely known that having a strong support system is vital. I have learned that these people can help me find my footing when I am struggling to center myself. “I think as a teenager you’re trying to find yourself. Middle school is where you lose yourself, you’re like ‘What the fuck is going on?’ And then high school is ‘Okay I’m gonna start testing the waters again, dipping my toes, wading into the kiddie pool’ You know, baby steps. I think finding communities that support you and having good friends and support systems definitely helps you through being a teenager and prevents you from drowning, you know?”

Another reason that being supported is important for the teenage experience is because we are bound to make mistakes. We have only been on this planet a handful of years, and we must get things wrong to learn how to get them right. “Being a teenager is kind of tumultuous. You’re gonna run all over the place. You’re trying to just take everything in, you

want to experience as much as you can. So that you're like, preparing yourself for adulthood, essentially.” Teenagers can make substantial mistakes, which can be terrifying. However, this is the best time to learn from them. “Now I can fuck up, and that’s so exciting. For me it is. I like fucking up and it’s not something I really fear because it makes for a good story and it also makes for a good lesson. So I’m like, ‘why not?’” When we let ourselves learn to walk before we run, we will fall; we will, also, eventually succeed. It is important to be intentional and safe; however, reckless and impulsive mean different things. I asked my interviewee, “What happens when you live your life impulsively?” “I feel more. Being safe, I get bored and I think I’m not living my life to the fullest. There’s always the unknown.” When we separate from perfect expectations, we find that the unknown is full of lessons.

I learned so much about myself and my fellow teenagers through the interviews I conducted and the analysis that followed. Although I had intended to write an essay about the one “right” way to live the teenage experience, as I searched for quotes in my interview recordings I learned that everyone is bound to move from childhood into adulthood differently. This is not an unfortunate situation; in fact, it is beautiful to learn about the many paths my peers and I carve as we grow up. “Everyone goes through being a teenager in such different ways. There shouldn’t be one way to define it. That’s definitely where the media gets it wrong.” Naturally, many of us will grow in similar ways and learn parallel lessons. My four interviewees and I have all become more aware of our surroundings and ourselves. We have navigated the ever-changing expectations and environments we exist in. We have learned to love ourselves, and are working on changing the traits we struggle to accept. We are finding our support systems and learning how to support others. We are making mistakes often, and learning from them always. We are setting ourselves up for the rest of our lives as much as we are taking the world day by

day. Being a teenager is fun, exhausting, informative, turbulent, and so much more. I cannot define this experience for anyone other than myself, and I want to keep it that way. Others can try to write guidebooks on how to be the best teenager or what should be accomplished by adulthood. These guides will not resonate with everyone, though, and it is more productive to sit back and watch us trailblaze rather than show us roads already taken. For me, the point of the teenage experience is to begin to discover where you fit into this vast universe, and what you want to leave behind when it is time to go.

Interview 1

What is the point of the teenage experience to you?

“It’s finding myself and figuring out what I like and what I don’t like. And asking, ‘What are my boundaries?’ ‘What are things I’ve noticed about myself?’ Obviously, that is going to continue into my adult life too. It’s just the first time that I’ve been told that I can do that.”

Interview 2

What is the point of the teenage experience to you?

“It’s a stage in life where you absorb the world around you. Then, as an adult, you can kind of apply what you learned.”

Interview 3

What is the point of the teenage experience to you?

“I feel like the point of being a teenager is exploring, creating, and carving out or starting to carve out the path that you want in life. I think it’s about figuring out who you are as a person and where you want to fit into this world.”

Interview 4

What is the point of the teenage experience to you?

“I feel like growing up, in general, is a huge aspect of life. [Life is] constant and ever-changing. I feel like we’re all just meant to continuously keep growing. Teenage years are where that kind of starts.”

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