

## WHAT THE WORLD NEEDS NOW: Finding Transcendence at a Teen Bereavement Camp

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Life for teens these days is a world apart from anyone over 30. Without being too specific about my own age, let's just say I hail from the Age of Aquarius. The technology teens have now, which they randomly whip out between classes or conversations or at any lull in the action, would be like magic to those of us who remember the 1968 Democratic Convention. Still, even with all the sophistication and superficial connection that Ipods, iPhones, IMs, and Myspace make possible, teens today have the same social, emotional struggles as any in history and twice the pressure.

Teens are heavy on my mind as I write this because I just completed a week-long stint running groups at a bereavement camp for kids between 12-19, created by a not-for-profit organization called [HYPERLINK "http://www.time4teens.org/"](http://www.time4teens.org/) [Time For Teens](#). There is a sense of dislocation that comes with the kinds of losses every one of these kids is going through, which can significantly inhibit their openness to people who are just passing through. But even though we began the week as strangers, a few days later - in a perfect reflection of the camp's theme - we found it hard to say good-bye.

Grieving teens bring a unique combination of an almost unstoppable desire to act on their feelings and a sense of powerlessness over what has happened to them, a mix that can easily turn their energy to seeking excitement and escape through any number of dangerous forms of acting out. Because of that struggle, I feel real empathy for adolescents, and I feel tremendous love for the kids who attended the camp. It may seem a long time ago that I was an adolescent myself - and some of my friends might say I still am in some ways - but I easily recall the tensions, the energy drain of hiding one's interior life in so many social situations, the craving of situations where I could drop the posturing and pretenses. That is why I look back on this camp with such a sense of transcendence. Because we were able to create a space in which these kids could be themselves and they entered into it fully. They came together, everyone's broken heart on their sleeve, caring for each other in astonishing and awe-inspiring displays of openness.

As a trainer, I am once again reminded how well experiential work, well, *works*. Experiential methods encourage playfulness that can easily deepen into more substantive self-expression, and supplies the means to share one's inner life in imaginative ways that are psychologically safe but creatively interesting. Teens living with losses as deep and searing as our campers are a wonderful test for the effectiveness of these methods, because it is very clear where they stand on what we are asking them to do. Either the kids respond and use the tools we offer them, or they simply turn off.

Using a range of warm-ups from simple improvisational games that activate creative energy and heighten a group's connection to the present moment, to more dramatic techniques like Transformational Breathing and Journaling, we were able to garner the creative and spiritual forces of everyone in the room to do tough, serious, therapeutic work. We used imaginative role-playing to bring lost loved ones into the room. The kids faced the emptiness their loss had left inside them but they did not face it alone. These kids took many leaps of faith, and through sharing their secret troubles and buried trauma we were able to weave a net of connection and support and positive energy.

I want to describe the gift I take from this experience. It is difficult to put into words, but a song from back in my day gives an idea. "What the world needs now, is love, sweet love," the song says. That safety net the teens knit together is for them and not for me, but I know that when the world and my own losses get to me, when next I feel weary and wounded, I will think of it and feel uplifted.