Chapter 11

Conflict and Chaos in Daily Life

Being Adolescent

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IN an ideal conception of development, an adolescent moves through the various domains of life while gaining new skills in each. From family, perhaps, one learns trust and personal discipline; from friends, comradery and democratic ideals; from solitude, reflection and self-understanding; and from school, the cognitive skills to function in a productive, adult career. Each day, each hour is a new lesson. Through an accumulation of meaningful experiences, the young person establishes a more complex, better-ordered self, and a more integrated relationship with the world.

There can be little doubt from what we have seen that the reality is far from the ideal. With their families, teenagers report feeling closed and detached; conflicts with parents and siblings stand in the way of attention to growth. In solitude, loneliness drains their energy; while concentration usually improves, happiness and strength tend to fade. We might have expected adolescents to be alive and attentive during school, where they are

confronted by a variety of intellectual challenges. Instead, they are unmotivated and able to pay attention for less than half the time. The context in which adolescents come closest to the optimal conditions for growth is that of friends; here they are happy, active, and inspired. Yet peer pressures and a lack of discriminating feedback limit what can be learned; with friends immediate pleasure tends to take precedence over everything else.

In this chapter we attempt to unravel the underlying causes of entropy in adolescents' lives. What prevents adolescents from making better use of their experiences? Why does so much go wrong? For young people to develop sturdy selves, they must find order and stability in their lives. What causes their consciousness repeatedly to be jolted into disorder?

The answer to this question lies in understanding how adolescents negotiate the hard realities of their everyday world. First, we will consider the forms entropy takes in each of the basic experience settings—the adult-structured domains of family and school and the adolescent-controlled domains of solitude and friends. Then, we will present a case study to illustrate how these problems follow each other, one after another. Lastly, we will evaluate what is common to all these occurrences of entropy: What are the underlying threads in teenagers' difficulties? Understanding the repeated problems and the limits they set will provide the framework for us to go on to examine where the potentials for adolescent growth lie.

Family and School

The family, for many teenagers, is a major source of discord. Conflicts occur over rolling the toothpaste, doing the laundry, and the hours a teenager keeps. While the topic of fights may be mundane, the underlying issues are often much deeper. They reflect basic issues in an adolescent's interactions with parents and siblings.

The main issue is autonomy. A young man who feels that most of his psychic energy is controlled by his parents, that he can't pursue his own goals because he must do what others ask of him, is threatened at the very roots of his identity. How can he be a person if all he does is follow instructions? He might as well be a robot. If he wants to feel like a person he must rebel, either by directly confronting his parents, or behind their backs, by blowing off steam with peers.

Rebellious youths are typically in pursuit of freedom, attempting to wrest control of their own psychic energy. The problem is that teenagers' freedom is always tied up with that of their parents, often in complex ways. Marge wants to go out to a movie with friends, and she cannot understand why her mother is refusing to let her go. Why can't she be in control of her own time? The mother's objection may stem from the fact that she is tired of doing all the housework without any help. *Her* psychic energy is being controlled by Marge, whose clothes she washes, whose meals she cooks, and whose board she pays by working full-time. This particular movie may not be the issue for her as much as her own bitterness that Marge will not do her fair share. She will not take responsibility for the vital maintenance tasks that are a part of sustaining her life.

In innumerable subtle ways, we always exploit the psychic energy of those close to us, and are exploited in return. In a family we expect to make sacrifices, that is, sometimes to give more than we take. What makes a warm family so special is the trust among its members, the implicit knowledge that, in need, one will always be helped. But not even the warmest family can survive long if one member expects the others always to be sacrificing for his or her sake. A balance has to be found, an equitable exchange that allows each member to realize personal goals.

Most adolescents learn to strike this balance the hard way, after much trial and error. In some cases they are the exploited ones, taken advantage of by siblings or by parents who insist on controlling their children's destiny. In such cases the conflict revolves around the teenager's struggle to carry out an age-appropriate personal task—the development of an autonomous

self. In other cases it is clearly the adolescent who exploits the parents, expecting with the egocentric insistence of youth that they allow him to reach his goals without concern for the costs to themselves. Most often, perhaps, both processes are going on at the same time, and sorting out the competing claims and counterclaims becomes an exceedingly complex matter than can lead to escalating conflict.

Whatever the situation, the family is inevitably a context in which negative feedback must be administered and endured. All parties set limits, make demands, and impose sanctions, creating inevitable entropy. The family is a cauldron of competing forces, and a teenager must learn the rudiments of give-and-take that make communal life possible: habits of cooperation, self-sacrifice, and mutual responsibility. It is a naïve fantasy that family life should be always idyllic. In fact, one must cultivate difficult skills in order to reduce the entropy caused by the conflict between divergent goals.

School, like the family, is an institution that tries to bend adolescents' goals in directions that they often resent. Forcing the attention of students into preset channels, it deprives them of control over their psychic energy. It is true that, taking the long view, one can see how the school experience will eventually *increase* the students' control over their psychic energy and help them to achieve goals they choose to have. But for many teenagers, it is difficult to take this long view, and even when they do understand its value, they still may resent the imposition of schooling here and now.

We should recognize that the claim that schools are for the good of children is a bit specious. Strictly speaking, schooling is only good for the adults that the children will one day become. And even this only because the society we have evolved requires the kind of education that school provides. It is no good pretending otherwise, and ignoring the inevitable conflicts created by a system that forces young people to confine their bodies and their minds to mechanical restrictions that are a bane to their freedom.

The entropy school creates promises to be a greater and greater

problem for adolescents. Schools spread in Europe during the seventeenth century, when the demands of an increasingly mercantilistic and bureaucratic culture required literacy. To function within the current world, adolescents now have to master an expanding array of information. The definition of literacy is extending to include computer programming, calculus, statistics, chemistry, and consumer skills.

Advances in technology represent only a part of the increasing complexity of the world that adolescents must enter. It has been said that the greatest achievement of the Apollo program was not the hardware that carried astronauts to the moon, but the extraordinary managerial and administrative systems by which tens of thousands of scientists and engineers were able to bring this hardware together (Brooks 1980). Material technology has brought with it an increasingly differentiated and intricate social order, taking the form of large, more complex, and more interdependent organizations like IBM, GM, and the federal government. Whereas daily life used to depend on maintaining good relations with a handful of influential people, it now requires skilled manipulation of complex social and bureaucratic organizations. The purchase of a car, a virtual necessity of modern life, inducts the consumer into a web of complex systems including road, energy supply, parts distribution, maintenance, registration, insurance, police, and legal systems (Hannay and McGuinn 1980). The extent of complexity in the social order underlying daily life is particularly evident in the legal sphere, where laws and the threat of lawsuits have come to govern ever-expanding aspects of daily intercourse, from muffler design to consultations with doctors to parental behavior. The number of lawsuits mediating this increasingly intricate social order is now doubling every 12 years (Lieberman 1981).

It is clear that knowledge of rules, techniques, and information has an increasing importance for members of our culture. The task of absorbing this mushrooming volume of knowledge falls directly on the young, and it is the job of schools to teach it to them. The National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983) suggests that, if American adolescents are to grow up

being competitive with their peers in other technological nations, they will have to spend more days a year in school and more hours doing homework, and they will have to tackle much more complex information. But the survival of the world as a whole requires that people not simply compete, but also be able to invest constructive attention into its continuance. The Club of Rome has voiced concern that there is an increasing gap between the complexity of the world and people's understanding of it (Botkin, Elmandjra, and Malitza 1979). For society to remain viable, it is argued, people must have the mastery to identify emerging problems in the social order and to shape creative solutions before they get out of control. Adolescents will not grow to be adults in the present; they will have to live their adulthood sometime in the future.

It is easy to see why school is such a frequent cause of entropy for teenagers. They just want to be kids, but the weight of an unknown future rides on their shoulders. They bear the load of mastering an enormous amount of cultural information, information which is necessary, whether they like it or not, for their survival as adults and for the survival of society. Thus, many show the kind of high-strung anxiety exhibited by Katherine Tennison, whose experience was discussed in Chapter 6. The tension, frustration, anger, and disorganization these adolescents report in school, is in part terror of the vast amount they need to learn to become adults. No matter how much they acquire, there will always be more; no matter how well they do on a test, there will always be another test that is harder and more challenging.

Solitude and Friends

When adolescents are alone, nobody tries to force them to do things they dislike. They do not have to load the dishwasher or study for exams. Yet, surprisingly, solitude brings more emotional entropy than school or the family; loneliness and passivity are an almost inevitable part of the experience. This is a clear

indication that teenagers' problems do not all result from conflicts with adults. When they are given their freedom, whether in the privacy of their bedroom or in the outside world, entropy intrudes on their consciousness more than ever.

A person is vulnerable to a different set of threats when alone than when with people. In the family or in school the battle lines are drawn, and the adolescent fights concrete infringements on his freedom. But in solitude he or she is facing a much more intangible opponent. All the problems encountered in the rest of life gang up on the solitary person, making him feel helpless and insignificant. When Lorraine's plans to study abroad fell through, the failure assumed threatening proportions in her mind; it was not just this particular plan that went awry, but that all her hopes seemed destined to come to nothing for the rest of her life. When with others, she could avoid these thoughts; but when she was alone, it all came tumbling back into her mind.

Most people can tolerate working alone or watching a movie alone, because their attention is taken up by the job or the vicarious life enacted on the screen. Anxiety does not have a chance to gain a foothold in consciousness. But few people feel comfortable when by themselves unless they have something definite to do. Whether watching TV, reading the newspaper, or just killing time, teenagers feel much worse when they are alone. The reason is that they are unable to structure the situation to make up for the absence of others. They cannot as easily set goals or provide themselves the pats on the back that friends or family members usually provide. Hence, reality tends to crumble around them, and they watch helplessly as they become victims of worry, passivity, and uncontrolled longing for others.

Entropy in solitude takes the form of aimlessness resulting from inability to structure one's activity. Those who have learned to function autonomously will fill their solitude with hobbies and constructive activities, even with learning, meditation, and reflective thought. Those who don't have the personal skills to shape their attention this way will flee from the anxiety of solitude artificially, through alcohol, drugs, or numbing entertainment.

The dangers of solitude to society must also be recognized.

Some teenagers become good at structuring their activities alone, but at the expense of goals shared with others. Autonomy is a virtue within our culture, but if taken too far it can turn into social deviance. Teenagers often go through a period of despising everyone else—parents, friends, "society." This stage can be useful because it helps an adolescent to become independent and self-reliant. But the young person who keeps up this attitude year after year may cause trouble; cut off from the checks and balances of one's peers, one's genius might flourish, but so might alienation and madness. Thus, solitude carries threats of entropy, both to the individual and the collective.

The entropy related to friends is in some ways the most difficult to deal with—partly because it is so difficult to detect. Most teenagers are so relieved to be with friends that they gladly lower their guard, and refuse to exercise any criticism. After all, compared to family, school, and solitude, friends provide an optimal context of experience. Unlike the first two, friends don't force us to do things we don't like; unlike solitude, friends provide amusement and diversion that keeps attention occupied. Most teenagers will tell you that friends represent the best and most meaningful part of their lives.

The companionship of peers is indeed seductive. It nurtures the self discreetly. Friends seem sensitive to one's own unique individuality—they are understanding, supportive, even affectionate, and they know how to have a good time. With friends an adolescent can unburden his soul, knowing he or she will be accepted. More than parents, siblings, or teachers, friends are responsive to the self and willing to support it unconditionally.

The problem is that, of the many potential friends, few actually turn out to be such, particularly in early adolescence. Most "friends" are just peers, competing for the same goals as we are. Thus, teenagers forever rewrite their list of friends and enemies, depending on the latest events. Greg Stone, for example, drops his old girl friend without thinking about it twice. Whereas friends can be very supportive, they can also turn on you, and the anonymous crowd of peers becomes a critical, sometimes frightening mass. To avoid ridicule, many teenagers are willing

to resort to the most abject conformity. Young people who resist adult rules with great determination submit meekly to the opinion of other adolescents. Adolescents who become overly dependent on feedback from peers end up falling from the skillet into the fire. No sooner do they win emancipation from their families than they lose their independence again by letting peer values determine their goals.

As with solitude, entropy with friends can be both personal and social. The root of the problem is the absence of reliable, reality-based feedback. Friends set goals, define rules, and define feedback, but only in the service of present enjoyment. Even the most sensitive and affectionate friendship is likely to be founded on a short-term framework of goals. Some of the worst feelings come from being abandoned by a buddy, scorned by one's own gang, or left by a boy friend or girl friend. With friends there is also a danger that interactions will lead further and further away from the norms of society into rowdy and delinquent behavior. The runaway positive feedback of friendship groups can easily careen out of control. Entropy with friends results from the lack of homeostatic mechanisms.

Entropy as a Constant Companion—The Week of Jerzy Madigan

The typical day of an adolescent does not unfold like a well-organized pageant. Their experience of life is more like a turbulent sporting event in which hopes and frustrations, elation and disappointment follow each other in no particular sequence. With the family, warm feelings are disrupted by the irritations of living together; in class, a sharp word from a teacher can destroy feelings of well-being. In solitude they are besieged by internal feelings of disorder and emptiness; and friends are an unpredictable source of entropic experiences, potentially as bitter as any other.

To appreciate the cumulative effect of entropy in adolescents' lives we need to look at how it adds up in the daily experience of individuals. Jerzy Madigan, aged 17, was a football star at Belmont High and an average student. As his week unfolds, we see him continually stumbling into difficulties in every part of his life (Figure 11.1). His spirits recover each time, but then he gets himself into another mess.

He started carrying the pager on a Monday afternoon and was feeling pretty good. During the first signal he is playing basketball in gym class and writes, "What the hell am I doing on such a lousy basketball team!" In spite of this predicament, he is cheerful, friendly, and is glad to be doing what he is doing.

At home that evening he has a good time joking with his sisters, but then they turn on the Miss America pageant, which depresses his mood. Television, as we have seen, has a consistently negative effect on teenagers' states. Nonetheless, Jerzy watches, even though he wishes he were doing something else. A call to his girl friend later that night gets him away from the TV and revives his good cheer.

The next morning at 8:40, we find him in a blue funk again, while taking the shower. A school dean has called him into his office that day, and he is worrying about what might be on the dean's mind. What has he done wrong now? Unfortunately, we don't find out much about this event, because Jerzy does not respond to two signals during the morning. His next report is at 2:58 P.M. when his moods are up again—he has sneaked out of school, the weather is beautiful, and he is having a pleasant conversation with a friend about being stoned. Apparently nothing terrible happened with the dean.

Just an hour later he reports another instance of entropy. He is playing basketball in the alley while talking with his sister and a friend of hers. In an attempt at prowess he tries to dunk the ball in the hoop. The ball goes in, but he comes down on some newspapers, falling on a garbage can and banging his arm and knee. He is in pain ("I almost killed myself," he writes) although the presence of the girls keeps him from feeling as bad as he might, had no one been there to witness his heroic crash.

Wednesday, we finally get him in class, and it is another low

point. He is bored, detached, confused; time is passing slowly and he greatly wishes to be doing something else. In the interview he reported, "It's one of those classes where you just go and listen; there's not much to do." The students try to argue with the teacher, but his attitude is, "I'm right. Just take it from me." Jerzy's mood is low, but only until the class is over. Later in the day, he reports high moods, except when he is hassled by neighborhood kids while sitting on the porch with his sister. They had just spit at him, and he is angry, threatening them with violence.

On Thursday morning Jerzy receives a signal while walking to school alone. He reports feeling passive, detached, unmotivated, and bored—the entropic pattern we know to be associated with most teenagers' solitude. The same profile occurs at 10:00 P.M. that night when he is again alone. He is lying on his bed, reading *Sports Illustrated,* and listening to a "great" concert on his stereo. But in spite of all this sensory input, he still feels weak, passive, and unmotivated. Entropy is a repeated and persistent part of his life.

Friday morning he gets upset with his "bitchy mom" when she makes him take out the garbage. This makes him irritable, angry, and lonely. But fighting with his mother is not as entropic as being in class. At 1:20 P.M., he is sitting in etymology class and is very bored, constrained, and unmotivated. Unable to concentrate on the teacher's lecture, he thinks about his girl and about the drinking he is going to do after school.

At last, after a week of stress and taking orders from others, Jerzy is free to do what he pleases. Friday night he has a good time drinking and driving around with his friends. There is one hitch, however. They have a little too good a time, are a little too free and easy, and their rowdiness leads the police to suspect them of stealing warm-up jackets at the racquetball club. Whether they did so or not we do not know. But it is clear that the mutual stimulation of this group of friends has led to a situation where they were in trouble with adult authorities. "Police suck!" he writes in a drunken scrawl on the back of the beeper sheet.

The next day, Jerzy is very tired from lack of sleep. This makes

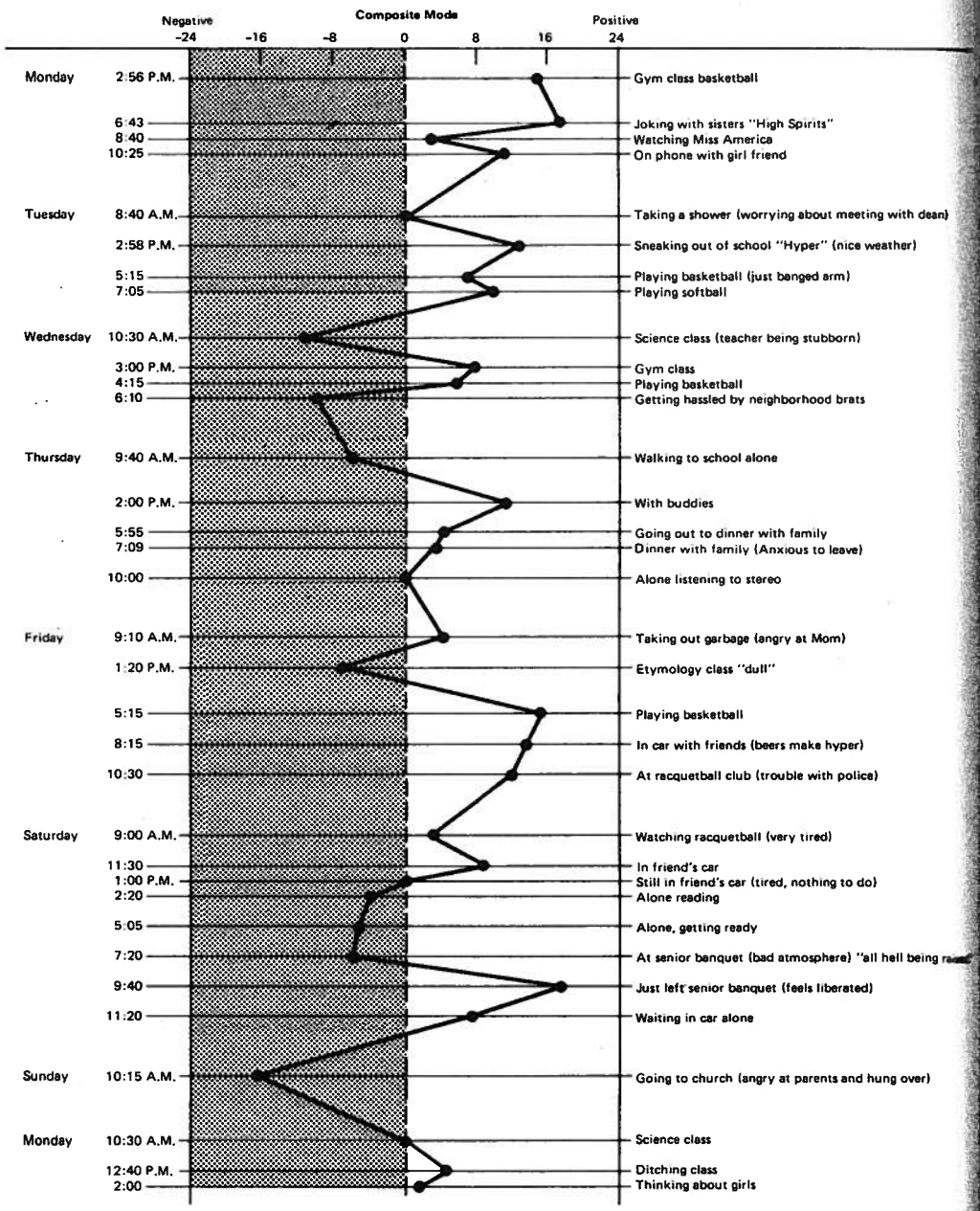

FIGURE 11.1
The Week of Jerzy Madigan
(From: Larson, Csikszentmihalyi, and Graef 1980)

him detached and irritable. In the evening he goes to the senior banquet, and the signal comes right after Greg Stone and his toga-wearing friends have turned the affair into pandemonium. Food has been flying between the Heads and the Jocks, and the principal is now lecturing everyone over the loudspeaker. For Greg Stone, you may recall, this incident was great fun. But for Jerzy and others who were not a part of either faction, it spoiled the event.

Jerzy's lowest mood comes the next morning when he is riding to church with his parents. He is irritable, angry, and hung over. He feels it a tremendous injustice to be dragged out of bed just for church, and, on top of it all, his parents are playing opera music on the car radio. His acrid comments on the situation were quoted in Chapter 7.

In sum, every time Jerzy turns around it seems as if he runs into something that will stand in the way of his goals. Encounters with entropy follow one after another. While Jerzy's character is unique, his rate of reported problems is by no means unusual. We saw similar patterns with Greg Stone, with Katherine Tennison, with Lorraine Monawski, and with all the others. Consciousness was continually being disrupted. There were few occasions when focused involvement in anything was maintained for long.

Why Things Go Wrong

Entropy takes many forms in adolescents' lives: from interpersonal conflicts with family and friends to internal strain faced in solitude. It includes stupid mistakes caused by lack of experience, disappointments from wild risk-taking, disillusion after high expectations, and pain in the endurance of mundane daily life, in sum, the agony of confronting raw reality. Teenagers constantly face the discrepancy between the way they want the world to be and the way the world actually is.

Of course, adults are hardly immune to encounters with entropy. They stub their toes, burn their tongues on their coffee, and accidentally drop china. Their disasters can be more momentous than those of their children—loss of a job, marital separation, financial ruin. But adolescents seem more prone to daily frustrations, and when things do go wrong their sense of order is more likely to be disrupted.

What is important is to understand the patterns of entropy particularly common to teenagers. Is there a pattern in the ways in which things go wrong?

The most frequent scenarios seem to involve becoming overwhelmed. Again and again, adolescents are overpowered by situations: the demands of school, the intransigence of a parent, high expectations they impose on themselves. The result is anxiety, worry, agitation, panic, anger, and fear. A girl described sitting in chemistry, "Listening to Mr. Molitor and going 'insane'; I just don't understand why H+ is +." A boy described "going out of my mind" because he couldn't solve an algebra equation. A major paper required in English classes made many students distraught long before it was even assigned.

The experience of being overwhelmed is frequently caused by goals set by school, family, or peers. But a major component is often the teenagers' own expectations. We saw the high goals Katherine Tennison set for herself. In a sense, Greg Stone was no less ambitious in his attempt to juggle two girl friends at once, and Jerzy was no less foolish in attempting to dunk the basketball. Adolescents have extraordinary hopes for the future, wildly idealistic notions of love and good times, and great expectations about what is possible.

The problem is perhaps not the size of the expectations—adults also load pressure upon themselves. The problem is that teenagers lack the experienced sense of their skills to carry them out. There is no accurate matching between persons' abilities and what they take on. Often absent is any realistic sense of what these limitations are—for example, the simple fact that their bodies have only so much energy, and that they tire after being awake so long. Thus Jerzy stays up all night with little

regard for how he will feel the next day. Teenagers' vague and unstable self-concepts prevent them from accurately rationing their abilities. The result is that they often become overwhelmed, like Katherine, who panics over a homework assignment that ends up taking only 20 minutes.

The opposite of being overwhelmed is being unchallenged. This occurs when people are uninterested in the opportunities available, when life holds no challenge or intrigue in what it asks. It can apply to life generally or can be focused within specific contexts. Jerzy and many of his peers greatly enjoyed their friends but were uninterested in helping around the house. In contrast was Chandra, a gaunt, cheerless girl who had no interest in anything but schoolwork.

Boredom is endemic to adolescents because there is much in their life that they do not control. They have not had a chance to internalize the richness of possibilities that are available. Perhaps also, they have not had the opportunity to numb themselves to the simple, mindless tasks that are a requirement of everyday living. School is boring because they are not invested in its goals. And a simple task such as feeding the dog becomes acutely painful because it is so relentless and unavoidable.

This situation is manifested as boredom, lethargy, and sometimes self-hate. Students like Jerzy reported watching television even though they despised it. The result was that afterward they despised themselves. Likewise, several had friendships that were dull and empty but they kept them up because they had no better choice. Again, the effect was to instill in them a sense of cynicism and bad faith.

A classic example of boredom is teenagers who spend hours in front of electronic games. While these can be stimulating and meaningful for a while, they often disintegrate into little more than a mind-filling routine. Surprisingly, many don't actually "play" the game, they simply follow memorized routines for winning.

The problem is that adolescents often have no meaningful goals. They have not had the time to attach themselves to anything they consider worthwhile. As a result, nothing is challeng-

ing to them, and their skills fall into disuse. Entropy takes the form of a meaningless waste of time.

Being overwhelmed and being unchallenged have common elements. They both represent states of imbalance between a person and the world. In one case the world offers too much, in the other too little. Underlying them both is a breakdown in a person's ability to control his or her actions—to set meaningful goals, define limits, and provide and receive feedback.

Of course, it is possible for experiences of entropy to serve as negative feedback. Katherine seemed to learn from her mistakes; she recognized that her bad moods were a sign that something was wrong and she needed to change it. But for many, this realization is slow. Others confront challenges by denying their existence, or by adopting cynical responses. One student, for example, mentioned cheating in school as a way he had come to use to deal with the overwhelming demands. Others found alternative ways to cope with or shut off the requirements of the adult world.

The Adolescent Predicament

Originally we considered entitling this book "Catching Teenagers' Attention," a name we quickly abandoned lest it be perceived as a manual that tells parents and teachers how to manipulate young people to their ends. Nonetheless, the basic issue remains the same. How is it possible for adolescents' attention to be engaged by the challenges of adulthood? Under what conditions will their spontaneous interests be transformed toward constructive purposes? This cannot be accomplished by adult manipulative tactics; it must involve a process of reciprocal exchange between growing persons and their environments. If there is a process of "catching," it is as much the teenager as the adult who must do it.

What we have seen in this chapter is that entropy repeatedly

stands in the way. In fact, the whole book has shown that adolescents' daily lives are a minefield of things that go wrong. Family, friends, teachers, and strangers are inevitable sources of conflict. The predicament of modern adolescents is that they must face these realities in addition to expanding cultural and technological requirements for adulthood.

It is not safe to assume that they will automatically join society, that they will turn into adults who order their lives according to the goals provided by the culture. Adolescent delinquency, suicide, and drug use indicate that many may be choosing not to grow up to fit the social order. In the late 70s, significant numbers of youth responded to adult society by becoming "punks," a movement in which coldness toward others was a hallmark and sticking safety pins in one's cheek was a sign of membership (Hebdige 1979). As is often the case, when confronted by an intolerable external order, adolescents are unable to restructure it harmoniously: they lash out instead, preferring to destroy the alien patterns and reconstitute their lives along goals that they can control and understand, even if these are primitive and ultimately destructive.

Trying to avoid entropy in experience is not a feasible goal. There is no way to escape conflict while still living a purposive life. Rather, disorder sets the conditions of growth. It establishes boundaries and sets challenges to attention. The question is, how can adolescents grow within these constraints? Is it possible for them to keep experience fresh, to enjoy living in the present while investing attention in future development?

Of course, there is no simple answer to this kind of question. We can only report what is suggested by the adolescents studied here. With this concern in mind, we interviewed them about the times they mastered the threats of immediate entropy, when they emerged from the struggle refreshed and enjoyed what they were doing. Their stories provide the material for the next chapter.