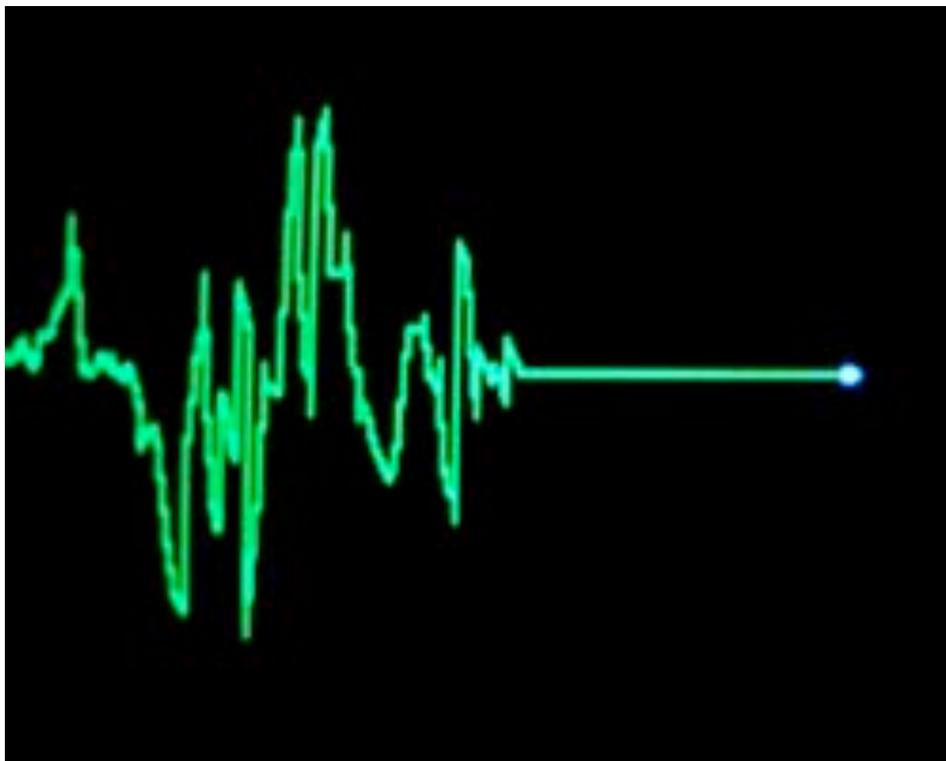# PULSE RATE RESEARCH

The future impact of American culture on missional youth work context in the west

Richard Passmore
Summer 2011

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ABSTRACT

North American[1] culture has a significant impact on shaping the worldview of young people in the UK and Western European culture in general. This impact is slightly delayed for two reasons; there is a slight time lag as cultural signifiers cross the pond, but more than this it takes times for the culture forming products to be absorbed into the broader culture and these become part of a worldview.

The hypothesis is that, by taking a snapshot of the values[2] (issues towards the core of a worldview) in the USA, it may be possible to identify the core themes that will be emerging over the next few years and beginning to influence the worldview of young people in the UK.

The themes identified will then be a resource base which youth workers can use as they support young people in their identify formation. This may take the form of conscientization[3] or however youth workers wish to use the themes. Building on the pilot studies this paper will offer a contextualized bible story around each theme as a resource to be adapted.

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[1] Primarily the United States of America

[2] See Appendix One and Two

[3] "developing consciousness, but consciousness that is understood to have the power to transform reality" http://www.infed.org/thinkers/et-freir.htm

BACKGROUND

About Richard Passmore

Richard is a professional youth and community worker and holds a post graduate certificate in Practical Theology. Often described as one of the leading thinkers around missional youth work, he spent several years teaching on BA (hons) in Youth and Community Work and Applied theology.

He has written two key books Meet Them Where They're At and Off the Beaten Track, exploring mission and youth work, authored several articles and developed The Fast Game. He currently heads up the StreetSpace initiative with Frontier Youth Trust and is married with three children. This paper was developed during a sabbatical period of 6 weeks between July and August 2011.

Frontier Youth Trust and StreetSpace

Frontier Youth Trust (FYT) is working with young people at risk towards justice, equality and community; we are a Christian network dedicated to advancing the Kingdom of God . Based upon our direct experience of youth work and research we also support, resource, inform, advise and train those working with and on behalf of disadvantaged young people. FYT believes that the most effective youth work is built upon Christian principles.

Frontier Youth Trust – our objectives:
1. Initiating, developing and resourcing direct work with young people at risk.
2. Developing research, training, resources and advice based on our direct work.
3. Giving a voice to local young people and their communities, enabling them to change those structures and systems that do not promote justice, equality and community.

Frontier Youth Trust – our values:
- National movement with a commitment to develop, mobilise and serve frontier youth work in all parts of the UK.
- Pioneering movement, which is flexible, creative and experimental, one that respects, listens to and identifies with those at the edges of society and church.
- Missionary community expressed in local, regional and national ways. A community which is

in costly solidarity with those who are marginalised in society and church. One which is engaged in theological reflection of its activity.

Streetspace is an initiative of Frontier Youth Trust (FYT) in partnership with Church Mission Society.   Our aim is to promote young people's personal, social and spiritual development in line with the core youth work principles of Empowerment, Education, Participation, and Equality of Opportunity.

The organisation a strong track record of helping get projects up and running, and provide a good support and learning base. StreetSpace is a growing community of practice with some of the most innovative missional youth workers in the UK involved.

Pulse Rate Research

Pulse Rate Research was developed by Richard Passmore as a way to explore the key issues and values of young people that were being engaged through StreetSpace. It is based on the Onion Skin Model[4] that is familiar to many anthropologists and cultural study students. It seeks to identify the core cultural[5] worldview of a group of young people by asking two critical questions of individual young people. These questions are designed to help identify the values and ID[6] of individual young people and then through a group work process the individual answers are themed into areas set by the young people. This thematic process enables the core cultural values of the group to be identified. The two questions used are:

1. What word best describes your life?

2. What word is most important to you?

From Pulse Rates to Mission

Much of StreetSpace's approach to mission is about discovering and following the Missio-Dei in mission. Therefore in part the pilots of the Pulse Rate Research hoped to discover what word for God was already present in the lives of the community that were being engaged. To explore ways to connect God's story with what was already happening in the cultural context. Much of StreetSpace's work has been about discovering the language around spirituality that young people may have already been using, but not yet connecting with God[7]. Therefore once the individual answers had been given and the themes were developed, bible stories were con-

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[4] See Appendix 1

[5] Culture can be defined as the way we do things around here

[6] See Appendix 2

[7] See Pimott and Pimlott Youth Work After Christendom Pages……

textualised around the theme. For example when working with a group of BMX and Skaters, the young people gave several individual answers around the sport. Words like Riding, Grind, Bike, Thrill, Pushing were offered. The theme that the young people then grouped these words under was Adventure. At the heart of their passion to ride was the need for Adventure and to push the boundaries of their abilities. From this word *Adventure* StreetSpace developed "The Adventurer" a creative contextualised bible story based around Jesus[8]. This story was used without purposed dominance[9], and simply put on the table to discuss over a meal with the young people if they wished. Some young people read it and engaged, for others it was too wordy and asked to be told the story, others simply ignored it, but as it resonated with some young people at a deeper level it is a resource that keeps reappearing.

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[8] See Appendix 3

[9] David Dark, Everyday Apocalypse: The Sacred Revealed in Radiohead, the Simpsons, and Other Pop Culture Icons (Grand Rapids Mich.: Brazos Press, 2002), (p. 16).

THE RESEARCH RATIONALE

Why the United States of America?

The American culture is a diverse, melting pot of cultures and indigenous people. Many European cultural patterns predominated early America, but increasingly people from Asia, Africa and South America have had a shaping influence on the American cultural landscape. The result is a unusual mix but also a uniquely transportable cultural identity. In the 1830's Alexis de Tocqueville commented "Americans are inclined to empathize the ordinary and easily accessible traits, rather than the unique and complex ones"[10] This is still self evident and it is clear that their culture is defined by it's popular features such as blockbuster films, TV and sports personalities and fast food. These easily transportable factors are evident in much of western culture from the high street to the bedroom walls of young people. However beyond this factors such as Consumerism, Music, Festivals, Democracy and Informality already have had a significant impact on European culture, and in particular British youth culture.

Examples include, the predominance of American film and characters in computer games. The shift towards end of term proms for school leavers, clothing lines, music and the ever present baseball cap of many young people.

The Research Rationale

Culture is the semiotic fluid we all swim in and as youth workers it is helpful to know the shifting culture affecting the context of young people that are being engaged. The aim of this research was to identify the future cultural conditions that are likely to be exported towards Europe over the next few years and due to a shared language, particularly the UK. Both the Onion Skin and the ID model suggest that the outward manifestations of a person; personality, attitude and behaviour are informed by their core worldview. If as the ID model suggests worldview's are the essential blend of nature and nurture, then culture is the backdrop in which this nurture happens, by seeking to identify some of the more core values of American citizens we can begin to build a picture of the factors that may be outwardly manifested in the

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[10] Cismas, Suzana "The Impact of American Culture on cultures: Language and cultural identity" University of Bucharest 2010

future, which in turn will influence young people we are engaging. This process happens because the growth of culture is a dynamic interplay of consumption, production, regulation, identity, representation (the circuit of culture[11]) and the development of values and worldviews, which is an irritative and interactive part of the process of individual identity formation.

In cultural terms America's export of its "ordinary and easily accessible traits" mean in turn through the nurturing process of the circuit of culture and cultures semiotic properties, worldviews in the West are at the least informed, if not shaped by these easily exported cultural representations.

Therefore by undertaking Pulse Rate Research across America and theming the answers with young people we will at one level gain a perspective on what may be impacting the young people we are engaging with missionally in the UK.

The Research Journey

In order to gauge a snapshot of such a vast country it was felt the only way to gain the data needed was to undertake the all American road trip. Research started in New York, travelling north through New York State and Indiana to Chicago. Then Route 66 west through Missouri, Oklahoma, states including..... to Fresno in the centre of California and onto San Fransisco.

Making Missional Connections

As with the pilot research, a contextualised bible story was developed based on the themes that emerged. So with this research a collection of stories will be developed that could be used by youth workers in the UK. There is the potential for the stories to find a relevance and create a space for dialogue as they may be tapping into the emerging culture and worldview of the young person. However there is more potential because, as Tom Atlee[12] would suggest,

> *"Story, as a pattern, is a powerful way of organizing and sharing individual experience and exploring and co-creating shared realites. It forms one of the underlying structures of reality, comprehensible and responsive to those who possess what we call narrative intelligence. Our psyches and cultures are filled with narrative fields of influence, or story fields, which shape the awareness and behavior of the individuals and collectives associated with them."*

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[11] Du Gay, Paul, et al. *Doing Cultural Studies: The Story of the Sony Walkman. Culture, Media and Identities*. London ; Thousand Oaks Calif.: Sage in association with The Open University, 1997.

[12] http://www.co-intelligence.org/I-powerofstory.html accessed July 1st 2011

Therefore by using biblical texts as the basis for the story there is the latent potential for the transformation of the young persons worldview, through their engagement with the story and dialogue that it may enable.

THE RESEARCH PROCESS

Research Stage One

The research process was divided into three Stages. Stage One was the gathering of the raw data, in this case the words. These were collected on the journey across the United States between July 12th and August 19th 2011. It was hoped that 200 people would be interviewed/asked to complete the answers to the two identified questions.

1. What word best describes your life?

2. What word is most important to you?

Small cards were developed[13] with a speech bubble on which the researcher, or the participant, could write their answer. It was explained that should the participant wish to see the results these would be posted on the Frontier Youth Trust website in the autumn. All data gathered was anonymous however the State and gender of the participant was recorded on the back of the card.

Participants were gathered from a cross section of people with a target age group of 14 - 40 years. The target group was chosen for a number of reasons. It was a narrower cultural scope and closer to the age group that are engaged in the UK. For those over 14 the impact of parent values are beginning to wane and self perception is growing[14]. Although most youth workers work with under 25yrs it was decided that practically under 40s would represent both those exposed to the cultural values and creators of culture in the future. It was also a pragmatic decision to ensure a workable process to data gathering. Where answers were gathered, but the participants were over 40, these cards were discarded.

Stage Two

Stage two of the research process followed as with the pilot with a group of young people themeing the words gathered into groups that they thought matched a selection of words. A group of young people to participate in this research was organised by a youth worker in Fresno California. There were XXX female in the group and XXX male all aged between XXX and XXX.

The research process was explained to the group and they were given 30 minutes ....

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[13] See Appendix 4

[14] See Stage three of both Selman's and Kolhburg's different models of adolescence development.

Laddering

In order to provide some rigor to the theming process a third stage was explored, developed from the concept of Laddering, a research process first developed by Hinkle 1965 based on Kelly's Personal construct theory. and adapted by Bourne, H and Jenkins M. 2005.

> *"Laddering is a method for eliciting the higher level abstractions of the constructs that people use to organize their world. The researcher taps into an individual's personal construct system and then follows it to the overarching values by exploring explanations for preferences at ever higher levels of abstraction."[15]*

Using Laddering in a group process was challenging but the laddering concept sought to gain some insight into the higher level (or in this case abstract worldviews) that would move beyond the more simplistic linguistic exercise of theming the words.

Different approaches were explored such as the concept of the Pulse Rate Monitor Ladder was introduced to the group. This was used in place of the original laddering concept. The idea being to introduce the Pulse Rate Monitor as a metaphor and worksheet to seek out and correlate higher level abstractions. For each theme the group was asked: To imagine the theme as a Pulse Rate being monitored, what stops the Pulse Beat or what is the opposite of the theme, eg *if the theme is Adventure then the opposite maybe boredom.* This is the down side or slowing of the pulse. Then they were asked what is it that fuels or pushes the pulse rate, makes it beat faster, what is it that is behind the theme eg *if Adventure maybe the driving force it is the need to prove you are alive.* Once this is complete it is repeated with the second down beat eg *What is it that is the opposite of Alive and this is preferred to death because....*

Stage Three

However in practice it became too cumbersome, with potential to lead to ambiguity rather than the desired higher level abstractions. In the end it was decided that the group in Stage Two should come up with as many themes as they wished with the number of themes being unlimited. These themes were then laddered by grouping again, and open questions asked to encourage the group towards higher level abstractions. This processes started by asking the group to identify the opposite of each theme, then asking them what is behind the theme and if these could be grouped together under a new heading and why. This then allowed the researcher to use the Stage Two themes as part of a lexicography in writing the contextualised stories.

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[15] Bourne, H and Jenkins M. "Eliciting Managers' Personal Values: An Adaptation of the Laddering Interview Method " in Organizational Research Methods 2005 8: 411

RESULTS

Words Collected

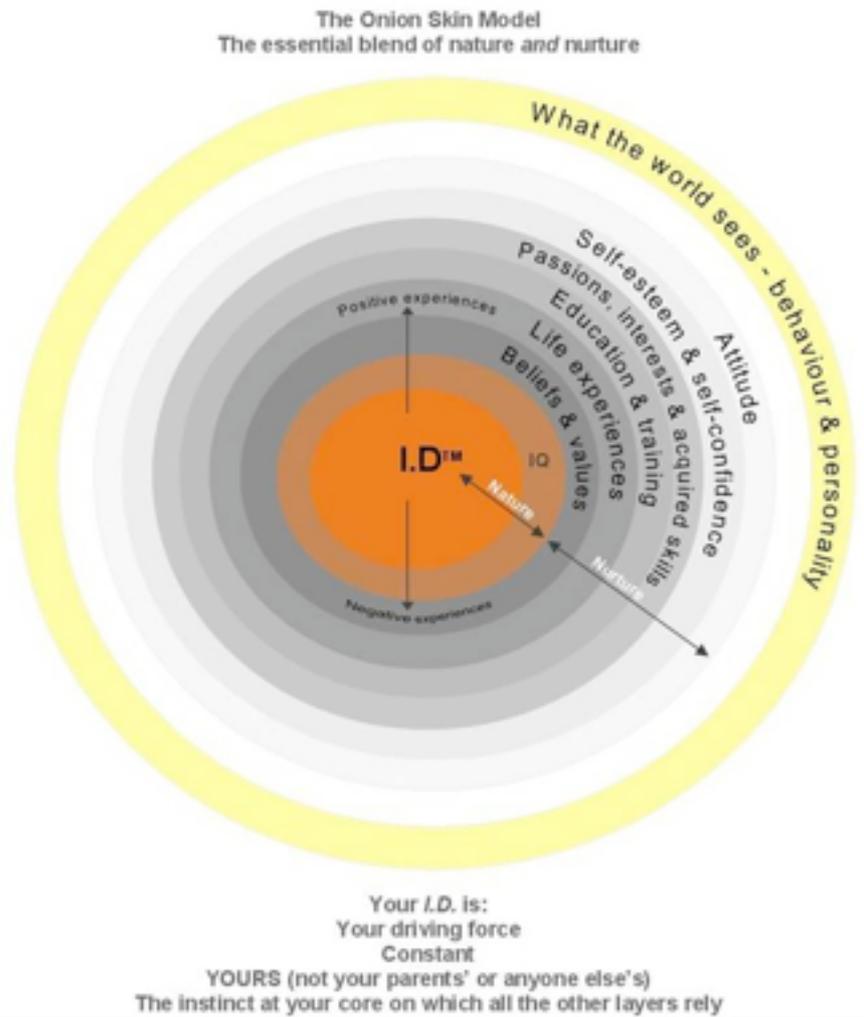| What word best describes your life?	What word is most important to you?

Themes Developed

APPENDIX 1

The Onion Skin Model of Culture

Behaviour

Values

Beliefs

WorldView

What Is Real

What is True

What is Good

What is Done
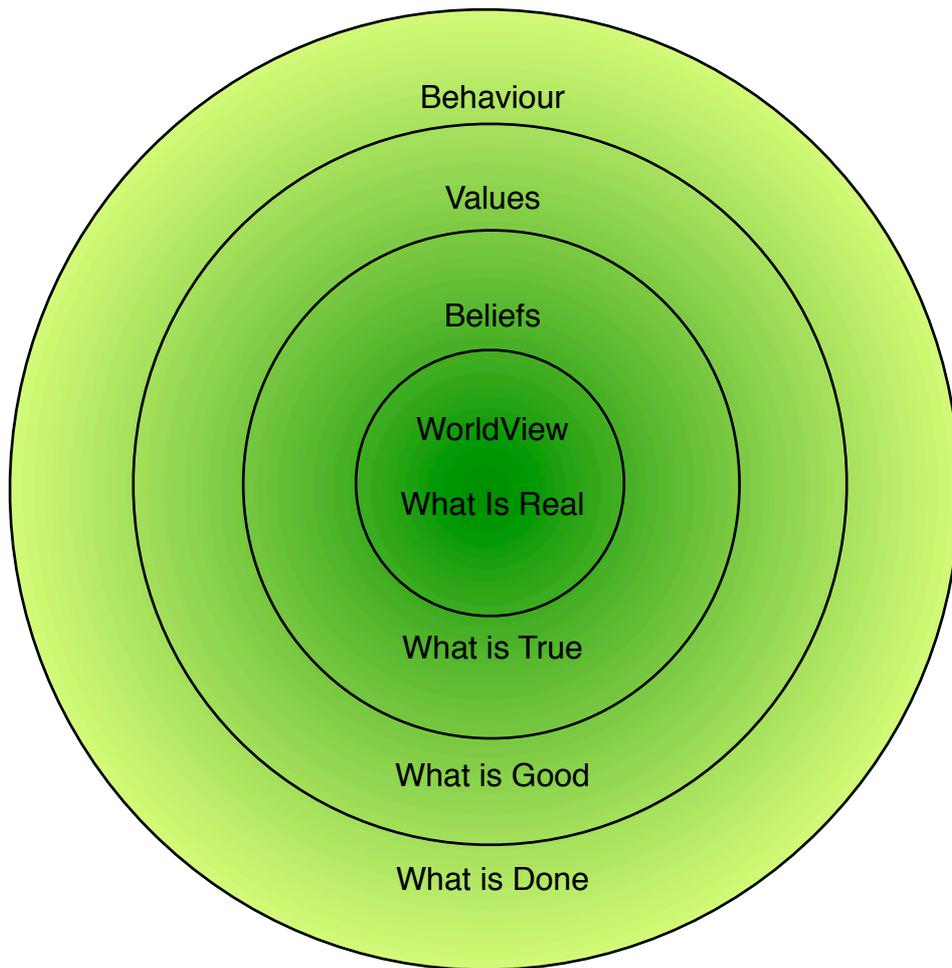
APPENDIX 2

The Onion Skin with ID Model of Culture

The Onion Skin Model
The essential blend of nature *and* nurture

What the world sees - behaviour & personality

Self-esteem & self-confidence

Passions, interests & acquired skills

Education & training

Life experiences

Beliefs & values

Positive experiences

Negative experiences

I.D™

IQ

Attitude

Nature

Nurture

Your *I.D.* is:
Your driving force
Constant
YOURS (not your parents' or anyone else's)
The instinct at your core on which all the other layers rely

The Adventurer

THE ADVENTURER

Nov 2010

Successful business woman and rider seeks new adventure

£ 8 0 7 9 9

THE GREATEST FEMALE RIDER EVER

Charlie was a BMXer who loved riding, and even when she had started out on a scooter loved the adventure of riding close to the edge and pushing new tricks. She was quickly developing a reputation as an excellent rider, so in order to make the most of her growing profile she decided to set up a shop locally....

...... and an online brand of clothes and equipment. Her technical skills grew which meant she could design new pedals and equipment that really enhanced riding. She even invested in new technology such as new alloys, that could be used in frames and was soon making frames that were lighter and stronger than anything else on the market. She made sure that everyone working for her got a fair wage and only used ethical suppliers where possible. Charlie was quickly raking it in and the money didn't corrupt her, she gave a portion to those who needed it including over 80k to a local skate park and always tried her best to be honest in business.

The thing she loved about having money was that she could chase the adventure, traveling to loads of places around the country and abroad. She flew around the world and rode in well know places that were just a distant dream to many, even jumping the great wall of China. On returning from her travels she paid attention to business and things continued to grow, but she was never quite satisfied and always longed for something else.

At about the same time a man was traveling around the area, who also had a growing reputation. People weren't quite sure what to call him, he wasn't a skater or biker, some people called him The Well Digger, as he once helped people find some water and dig a well, some people called him The Builder for similar reasons, others called him Sufi – someone who was spiritually enlightened, and at peace with themselves, to others he was the Teller, still others just said he really had the X Factor. The problem was he never fitted into any one box. People who had heard his stories, or spent time with him, could never quite sum him up in one word or label him this or that. They said he had healed the sick, and helped the poor, built houses and you never knew what what was going to happen next, and although he too was poor he was rich in a different way.

The group that traveled around with him were known as "the adventurers", as he set them challenges, and always asked questions that made them think or act in a different way. As a group they never knew where they were going next or what they were going to have to eat the next day, but something always turned up, and anyway what better way to keep the adventure real. Even though Charlie had been on many adventures, and always pushed her

riding to the next level, she always felt something was missing. Something needed to change she told herself, and so went to find this man that couldn't be put in a box. On finding him, and not being the shy type, she explained how she loved the adventure and how she had tried to live an ethical life, and asked "what must I do to join the adventurers and journey with you?"
The Man replied "go and sell all your possessions, your business, your bikes and inventions and give the money to the poor, then come and join us?"
Charlie went away disappointed.

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Title." City: Publisher, Date.

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