

Summary of Touching Spirit Bear

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Introduction

The book *Touching Spirit Bear* follows the story of a fifteen-year-old boy named Cole Matthews. Cole is leaving **early adolescents** and entering the **late adolescent** stage of life, which by definition means he is finishing puberty and transitioning into focusing on finding his individual identity (Cobb, 2010). This book, by Ben Mikaelson, follows Cole in this critical stage of his life as he is forced to deal with the consequences of his poor judgement and focus on growing his personal development. As the story progresses, Mikaelson has Cole confront himself many times as he begins his ascent into **emerging adulthood** where Cole finally starts to understand his purpose in life.

Late Adolescent Displays

We are introduced to Cole as he is being taken to an island for banishment. It is then explained that Cole has anger issues and has been in trouble before. He was sentenced to jail time after beating up a ninth-grader from his school, Peter Driscall for telling the police that he robbed a store. Cole beat Peter senseless, which sent Peter to the hospital and Cole to jail. As a way to avoid being in jail for many long years, Garvey, Cole's probation officer suggested he join Circle Justice, a group designed to focus on hope for the people participating, not just to inflict punishment and blame, that would decide his fate. After weeks of discussion, the group finally made the decision to banish Cole to an island in Alaska for a year so he could work on personal development.

Throughout this first section of the book Cole displays many signs of a late adolescent. He is **egocentric**, meaning he is self-centered and only has regards for his own point of view. He has an **imaginary audience** because of his egocentrism, meaning that he feels he is always the center of attention, and he also has a **personal fable**, meaning he believes his thoughts and

feelings are special (Cobb 2010), which leads him to believe that no one understands what he is going through many times throughout the book.

The first way this was shown was after he beat up Peter. “Cole figured he wouldn’t even be here if Peter Driscall had known how to fight back. Instead, Peter was hospitalized. Doctors’ reports warned he might suffer permanent damage. “Serves him right”” (Mikaelson. 2001, p. 8). However, one of the best ways this was shown, was after Cole had burned all the items he was left with after being dropped off on the island. The narrator states, “Nobody cared about him. Nobody understood him. Nobody knew what it was like living with parents who wished he wasn’t alive. It angered Cole that people pretended they didn’t” (Mikaelson, 2001, p. 26). At this point, Cole did not realize that his friends and family left him with this opportunity to turn his life around, as the only other option was jail, a sentence that would ruin his life forever.

Adolescents think this way because their brains are transforming, with the biggest change being the remodeling of the prefrontal cortex. The **prefrontal cortex** is in charge of goal directed behavior, planning, and decision making. The **limbic system**, which is found below the prefrontal cortex and controls social and emotional processing, matures much faster than the prefrontal cortex (Cobb 2010). This means that adolescents are only able to process information through the limbic system in emotionally salient situations until their prefrontal cortex is fully matured. This leads adolescents to partake in novelty seeking, sensation seeking, and risky behavior, such as stealing and beating people up, both examples of what Cole has done. Scientists have found that this behavior provides the opportunity to explore potential rewards, doing so increases dopamine levels (Spear 2000), and gain social status among peers, something that is highly valued among adolescents. This is a time for adolescents to overcome their fears, but they also constantly seek emotional satisfaction as well (Zhao, 2015).

Individual Difference

Cole struggled with his family life, which could be argued to be the source of why he was so angry all the time. There are **four basic needs of life**: to be accepted, to belong, to have control, and to have a meaningful existence (Nixon, 2016, class notes). His father beat him, giving him no control, and his mother did not know how to help so she stepped out of the way, making him seem like he was not accepted and did not belong. Thus, Cole's basic needs were not met, and social exclusion came in to play. Loneliness and rejection are associated with low meaning of life (Stillman et al., 2009) and Cole had said many times throughout the book that he did not care what happened to him, which may have been why he acted out. This, mixed with Cole's adolescent brain, is one of the reasons why he needed to go on a journey of self-discovery, so he could truly understand his purpose as thus far, his family has been of no help in doing this.

Touching the Spirit Bear

After Cole destroyed his shelter and food, he spotted an all-white "Spirit Bear". Still enraged from being left alone on the island, he charged the bear aiming to kill it. Before he was able to do so, however, the bear realized what was happening and lunged at Cole in self-defense, mauling him to near death. This was the first time Cole had felt powerless, something he was not used to feeling, and he did not like it. Soon, a storm hit the island knocking down a tree and killing baby birds living in it. It was in this moment Cole pondered life. "The sparrows were so frail, helpless, and innocent. They hadn't deserved to die. Then again, what right did they have to live? This haunted Cole. Did the birds insignificant little existences have any meaning at all? Or did his?" (Mikaelson, 2001, p. 82). He decided in this moment he wanted to live, but he wanted real power this time and not the fake power he had before. The Spirit Bear came back over to

him, and again Cole became powerless, but instead of killing him, the Spirit Bear stood there watching him. Cole reached out to touch him, and experienced trust, something people did not have in him in a long time. It was this traumatic experience that opened Cole's eyes up to the angry life he was living. He realized he needed trust and that from that day forward, he would no longer lie and would take full responsibility for his actions.

Shifting into Emerging Adulthood

After Cole was rescued from the island, he had to go through Circle Justice so they could decide his fate yet again. Although most of the members still did not believe that he had changed, Garvey and Edwin, the native Tlingit who had taken Cole to the island previously, took it upon themselves to give Cole a second chance at the island so he could finally deal with himself and find peace. The group agreed to let him go back and thus, Cole started his personal journey toward finding a purpose in life with real commitment this time. And finally, after a year of being on the island, Cole was able to practice self-control so well, that he invited Peter on to the island because he believed he could help him through his journey to find a purpose as well, as Peter had been depressed and had even attempted suicide. Cole knew he could help Peter, and this was the best way he could finally do so and take responsibility for his actions in the process.

Adolescence is a great time to learn to find oneself as adolescents are able to think abstractly. It also “offers unique windows of opportunity for engagement and experiencing the world around them in multiple ways” (Zhao, 2015, p. 2). In her article, Zhao argues that adolescents can best take advantage of scaffolding and learning new skills such as motivation and learning at this age because of the developing and reshaping of the brain (2015). Indeed, as well as the prefrontal cortex remodeling, **cell proliferation**, the production of neurons, **synaptic pruning**, the elimination of neurons that are not being used, and **myelination**, the formation of a

myelin sheath around axons that increase transmissions between neurons (Cobb 2010), are all processes that are happening very rapidly in the brain during adolescence. Simply put, neurons are constantly being created in the adolescent brain. If they are not used, then they will be eliminated, but if they are used often, they will be preserved. Therefore, if an adolescent were to learn a new skill at this time, such as practicing self-control as Cole learned on the island, the more often he does this, the easier it will be for him to always practice self-control from that point on.

This can be seen in the book. Although at first Cole has a tough time keeping back his anger, after spending a year on the island virtually by himself, he is able to keep it together even when Peter is attacking him.

“” Peter I’m not a bad person. I got mad at you ‘cause I was really mad at myself. I thought my dad beat me because I was worthless.” Cole paused. “The dances, carving the totem, carrying the ancestor rock, touching the Spirit Bear, it was all the same thing- it was finding who I really was”” (Mikaelson, 2001, p. 237).

Admitting this to Peter was a big step for Cole because it meant he had finally admitted to himself that he had value in life, something he did not think he had for the longest time. This is a characteristic of an emerging adult. Although technically Cole is not old enough to be in this category, his time on the island has taught him valuable life lessons that have brought him past his immature prefrontal cortex. What is more, Cole finally has that meaningful existence he has been looking for, he has control over his anger, and once he gets off the island, he will be accepted and will belong with his mother, who finally started to make a connection with him before he left for the island the second time. Cole has finally met the four basic needs of life.

Final Thoughts

Cole went from a very troubled teen to a relatively well adjusted young man all because one person, Garvey, was able to help him through his adolescence because he knew things would get better for Cole. If not for his suggestion to use Circle Justice instead of jail time, Cole would probably have been much worse off. He would not have been able to control his anger like he was able to at the end of the book, he would not have a good relationship with his mother, and finally, he would not have been able to trust himself enough to find his purpose in life. This hopeful circle put its faith in Cole, and although he messed up a lot, he was able to use this to find himself. Adolescence is a tough time, and *Touching Spirit Bear* is a great example of how anyone can overcome their past and create a bright future for themselves.

References

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