

The Story of the “Jesus Nut”

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One day, long ago and far away, I engaged in shoptalk with a helicopter pilot who told me a story that fundamentally changed my perspective on the world.

We were discussing the kinds of things that can go wrong with a helicopter, especially when flying over terrain inhabited by angry people with automatic weapons. This pilot had been shot down twice, and each time he had brought his damaged craft to the ground with no significant injuries to the people in it. He was, as are many young pilots, confident: “No matter where you’re hit,” he said, “there’s always something a good pilot can do to adjust and get his ship down and keep his people safe.” He paused, “Except when the Jesus Nut goes.”

The Jesus Nut, he explained, is the nut that secures the main rotor to the aircraft. If this nut comes off, the main rotor detaches, the chopper drops like a stone, and those in the helicopter “meet Jesus.” And, the pilot added, the cause of the Jesus Nut coming off is invariably a human failure to check that it was securely fastened.

I remember thinking that the pilot was pulling my leg. “Come on,” I said, “checking the Jesus Nut has to be the first and last thing every crew chief and pilot does before takeoff.”

He countered with, “What’s the first rule in baseball? ‘Keep your eye on the ball.’ Ever take your eye off the ball?” I admitted I had taken my eye off the ball more than I cared to remember.

“It’s not that people don’t realize that something is important,” he said, “but they get distracted, and people who are distracted have a great capacity to forget the stunningly obvious.” In my mind’s eye I can still see and hear him make his

point, and I knew intuitively that he was right. He added that, when he was in flight training, the school commandant made all the candidates listen to the recording of the last transmission from a helicopter whose pilot had not checked the Jesus Nut before takeoff.

In every organization and culture there is a metaphorical Jesus Nut, that one thing that must be protected at all costs. The Jesus Nut at SAAS involves relationships, and the most important of these relationships - the Jesus Nut of the Jesus Nut, so to speak - are those between the faculty and the students. The quality of these relationships is, as members of the accreditation team from PNAIS noted during their recent visit and in their formal report, “exceptional.” One team member added that the level of comfort and engagement between kids and adults is “striking to a first-time visitor.”

I think it’s important to focus on the single most important consequence of these exceptional relationships: Our Jesus Nut facilitates a culture in which there is a high probability that a student will develop a relationship with an adult whom he or she sees as a mentor. The best definition of a mentor I have ever heard came, naturally enough, from a student, “A mentor will kick your butt when you need it, will have faith in you when you need someone who is not your mom or dad to have faith in you, will not put up with your BS-ing other people, and most importantly, will not put up with your BS-ing yourself.”

We talk frequently at SAAS about “the transformational moment,” an idea which at first blush sounds a bit New Agey. But it isn’t, and if you doubt me, talk to our graduating seniors: after a transformational moment - which can



occur in a classroom, during a casual conversation, on the athletic field, on the stage, or during a trip - the individual is qualitatively different from the way he or she was before the moment. Most of our graduates can point to such a moment in their SAAS lives.

I'm convinced that the likelihood of a transformational moment goes up dramatically as the student develops a relationship with an adult mentor. The great barrier that keeps some individuals from crossing into adulthood is fear. Sometimes it is the fear of failure, sometimes it's the fear of trying something new, curiously often it is the fear of success, and more than one would think it is the fear that one's self is simply not sufficient to the task before it. Whatever the root cause, this barrier must be crossed if the young person is to develop a strong sense of self the only way a truly strong sense can be developed, from within.

I once saw a cartoon that for me captured perfectly what a mentor does for the young person: an eagle is talking to an eaglet in a nest on the top of a cliff. Suddenly the eagle tosses the eaglet out into the void. In a frenzy of panic and flailing feathers, the eaglet plunges towards the rocks below. Halfway down the eaglet stops flailing and begins to fly.

Every good teacher, and every good parent, has done what that eagle did, and every eaglet knows, however deeply buried the awareness, that this moment is coming.

There are four things that are essential to a culture that fosters such moments: the amount of time that adults spend with students (don't skip lightly over this one: with the proliferation of e-mail, voice mail, and cell phones, in some schools teachers spend more time talking to parents about their kids than they spend talking to the kids themselves); opportunities for

interactions between adults and students outside of class (hence our willingness to support trips, Spring Days, the arts, athletics, etc.); the presence of adults who have the life experience that both imparts to their perspective a credibility that eaglets find reassuring and also gives the eagles the wisdom to know what the individual eaglet needs (hence our institutional preference to hire those with "Life degrees" as well as academic degrees), and, most importantly, trust, without which no mentoring ever takes place.

This essential role of trust in the mentoring process is why we at SAAS make such a big deal of trust, why we do much of what we do, why we don't do much of what we don't do, and why we react so strongly to anything that threatens trust. The presence of trust enables daily life to flow smoothly and enables us to work things out in a reasonable way when bumps occur, and this smooth flow of daily life makes everyone happier and more productive. But the real value of trust comes when the eagle tosses the eaglet out of the nest, and the eaglet begins to fly into its eagleness.

In the cartoon world, nothing really bad ever happens, so there is no cost for failure, but in the Real World, bad stuff most definitely does happen and a certain level of fear is not only justified, but prudent. When young people summon the courage to cross that barrier separating the person they were from the person they wish to be, they do so in large part because they trust that the mentor's faith in them is a reality greater than the reality of their fear.

All my experiences since that conversation with the chopper pilot have reinforced how right on target he was: very few people and organizations intend to have their main rotor come off. But we are all human, and humans get distracted and take their eye off the ball,



no matter how talented the person or organization might be. Remember Bill Buckner. (If you don't understand the reference, find someone from Boston and whisper this name, but bring a big box of tissues.)

For me, the true meaning of the pilot's story is that Not Doing Dumb Stuff is often more important than Doing Smart Stuff. It's more important to not screw up the Jesus Nut than it is to show how creative and smart we are in solving little problems (and all problems pale next to the one presented by the failure of the Jesus Nut).

As we begin the school year, let us all commit to an unwavering focus on preserving and enhancing the quality of the relationships between the adults and the kids at SAAS, and in the process we shall insure that we keep our Jesus Nut firmly attached and our helicopter flying safely into the future.

