

Cold Water to Ice

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In talking with parents about the fascinating but mysterious process of adolescent development, I occasionally use the “cold water to ice” analogy. When I was a kid, I always wanted to witness the exact instant when water turns to ice. I was never successful, no matter how hard I watched. Something would distract me (often it would be my feet growing numb) and then suddenly there would be a thin sheet of ice where there was once cold water. Identifying the moment in which a child becomes a young adult is a task that is about as difficult as witnessing the transformation from water to ice. A parent can take comfort in the reality that for most kids the moment will come sometime during the high school experience. That’s the good news. The bad news is that there is a high probability that neither the parents nor the educators nor the kid will see the moment coming.

In my opinion there are three changes within a young person that signal that the ice has formed.

The first is the development of a sense of vulnerability, the first glimmer of what will be a growing awareness that there is a randomness to human existence; that when the Great Slot Machine of Life lines up all the lemons on a given day, One of Those Things can happen, and, if it does, then there will be times when all the King’s horses and all the King’s men can’t put Humpty Dumpty back together again, no matter how good their intentions might be. And sometimes Humpty Dumpty is a nice person, and always Humpty is someone’s daughter or son. Children of all ages are ignorant of or seek to deny this reality.

I happened across a great example of childish behavior last year: a senior had gotten dangerously sick over the weekend after taking hallucinogenic mushrooms. His parents wanted me to talk to him. I asked him how he could risk his health by taking a substance whose nature he could not verify, which had come from a source he did not know. Said he, “But I got

them from a friend.” “And from what socially conscious, non-profit, safety-first drug dealer did the friend get them from?” I asked.

When the young adult matures, and especially when he or she becomes a parent, this first glimmer of awareness that bad things can happen to good people will usually grow into the realization that if you manage to avoid a time when Life lines up all the lemons, you might be smart and hard working, but you are also Awfully Darn Lucky. This epiphany tends to occur around the time that the now-grown son or daughter thinks, “Damn, my parents are a lot smarter now than I remember them being when I was a kid.”

The second difference between the child and the young adult is that the young adult begins to understand three related realities: the enormous, impossible-to-exaggerate value that one needs to place on the trust of people who genuinely care about you; the stone-cold truth that the number of people who genuinely care about you is frequently a lot smaller than you think; and the reality that the first two people on the list of those who genuinely care are invariably mom and dad. Children are as cavalier about real trust as Miami residents are about the sun. Adults realize that real trust is very much like the sun, in Seattle, in February. As I frequently tell students, “Why risk this trust over diddlysquat stuff?”

The third difference between the child and the adult is that the adult accepts responsibility for his or her actions, whereas the child uses a whole range of mechanisms that deflect responsibility to Almost Everyone Else (something that is very easy to do in the America of 2003). For example, I’ve had juniors and seniors tell me that they were coerced into doing drugs because all their friends do. If a middle school student were to say this to me, I’d at least listen. But when a junior or senior tries it, my response is one two-syllable word that begins with “B.”



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Parents and educators can relentlessly hammer these and other truths at children without much apparent success. If experience has taught me anything, however, it is that parents and educators who are doing and

saying the right things should have faith: keep at it, keep at it, and keep at it. If you do, then one day, sooner for some and later for others, the water will suddenly be ice.

