

Responsibility: Fork in the Road

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From SAAS Watch

As a private human being, I've always ascribed to the "fork in the road" theory of human behavior, first enunciated to me by my drill sergeant in Basic Military Training. Sgt. Gravely told us that it was his job to impart all the knowledge and training we needed in order to be good soldiers, but that all he could do—and all he would consider himself responsible for—was to insure that we would be positioned at the "fork in the road" of individual choice and could then make—or not make—the personal decision about what kind of soldier we were going to be.

If we took the correct fork, he said, all credit for what we became would belong to us, not him. If we took the wrong fork, all blame would belong to us, not him.

As an educator, whether the educational venue be history, English, Russian, football, or wrestling, I've applied the same standard to students, tempered by an awareness that each student will arrive at the fork in the road at a different time during his or her high school career, and that giving up on a student too soon can be the educator's—or the parent's—biggest mistake.

That said, a school must insure that its operating philosophies are in line with its Mission Statement. The mission of this school is to prepare students for Life, and life requires the exercise of a strong sense of individual responsibility. So it is understandable that teachers at SAAS assume that students are expected to display a sense of responsibility even as freshman, and to become increasingly more responsible as they progress through the high school years.

And it is equally understandable that some parents will question if too much responsibility is being expected too soon. A specific example of such questioning is the occasional parent request that a student's assignments/progress be communicated to the parent on a daily or weekly basis so that the parent can help to monitor academic achievement, or lack thereof. (The teacher's response to such a request is often that the student has been given all assignments in class and the parent has regularly been informed at home of any developing problems, and that by requiring further communication the parent is trying to get the teacher to compensate for the student's lack of individual responsibility.)

Such a discussion—perhaps the better word is "negotiation"—is common and proper between teachers and parents as both seek to help young people through that most complicated period, high school. This critical time is characterized by remarkable leaps of maturity which occur regularly, but not always according to a schedule, with the result that there is often a gray area in which parents and teachers have different responses to the question of how much responsibility a student is capable of exercising, or how much personal responsibility a student should be required to exercise, and when.

Given that there are reasonable differences of opinion about this important and somewhat subjective area, I still think that a teacher or parent errs if he or she believes that it is possible to both lead the student by the hand to that fork in the road and then to lead him or her by hand down the correct path. Such cannot be done. And



when we try to do the impossible, we get frustrated.

For example, I recently had a discussion with a frustrated parent who believed that her son's academic difficulty was more the result of our institutional failure than his individual failure. She stated that the school had not done what it claims to do in terms of academic reinforcement of the student and of general communication to the parents.

I agreed that a specific lapse of communication protocol had in fact taken place, wherein a teacher who customarily does an excellent job of keeping parents informed of student lapses had made a mistake and not sent home a notice of a particular transgression; and I agreed that we as an institution took responsibility for this mistake and would work to insure that it did not happen again.

But I also made the point that nothing the parents could do at home or that we could do at school would create an academic mechanism so fail-safe that a student would succeed without taking responsibility for his or her own life and actions.

The issues of this conversation made me think again of Sgt. Gravely, and I remembered two points which he made frequently, two points which time had convinced me bore the mark of that common sense which is the other side of the coin of genius: he said that we would need to be pushed and challenged to get to that fork in the road (He said that he would make sure we were pushed and prodded, a promise he fulfilled, and, allowing flaws which are part of the process of being human, a promise which we at SAAS fulfill.); and he said that when we trainees stood at the fork in the road, each of us would, at that instant of decision and self-definition, have no one to rely upon but ourselves, a solitude which constitutes

the core of choice and responsibility (a prediction which rates as the single truest thing I have ever heard).

And so, while teachers and parents discuss and negotiate the best way to push and prod the young people to that fork in the road, we and, especially, they, the young people, must accept that the ultimate responsibility for self-definition is with the individual, and not those who push and prod.

