



FAMILY & SCHOOL
a broken trust

HYDE
Education Character Family

FAMILY & SCHOOL: *a broken trust*

Another teacher and I were recently reflecting on our school days. He noted there was a constant at work in his home whenever he got into trouble at school: "I was wrong!" The burden was on him to find a way back into the good graces of his teachers. It was the same in my house and probably in yours as well.

today it might go like this...

Parents: "Mrs. Smith, what did you say to Johnny, which caused him to act out so aggressively?"

A trust has been broken between home and school. Each side believes the other is not doing its job. Both sides are partly correct. This trust once fueled a collective wisdom that instructed our children and inspired the lifeblood of our society. The vacuum left in its absence continues to fill with sludge, offering toxic instruction and a dubious future. A view from "both sides of the desk" follows.

a personal history

I was born at the median of the Baby Boom, the same year as Brown vs. Topeka. As kids, we sensed that we were part of the reactive crusade touched off by Sputnik and were consumed with pride in our little New Hampshire elementary school when native son Alan Shepard went into space. I neither liked nor understood the New Math (If the truth be known, I'm sure I would not have fared much better with the "old" stuff.), but my classmates and I accepted the notion that it tied into this larger, more easily perceptible cause of beating the Russians to the moon.

The new and exciting term "civil rights" galvanized us, and it seemed that every genre of influence exuded personified charisma: government symbolized hope in the form of John Kennedy, music had The Beatles, sports had Ali and Joe Namath, and we had our own role model in the Beaver. Even the "bad guys," those Communists, enthralled us: there was Castro's revolution in Cuba, and Khrushchev seemed to stand for something beyond himself when he banged his shoe on the United Nations table and threatened to bury us. It was a glorious time to be a kid. A successful ad campaign of the period summed it up: "We must be doing something right."¹

It's hard to determine exactly when things went sour. Jimmy Carter may have sealed his political fate when he spoke of a "malaise" over the American people, but he was probably right. By then, President Kennedy had been assassinated and his charisma replaced with Watergate. The Beatles' influence had peaked at Woodstock and then plummeted to the depths of Altamont. Our athletes became free agents and are now tested for drugs. The Beaver turned into Bart Simpson and the Cleavers into South Park. Castro and Saddam Hussein may share preferences for military garb, but somehow the former seems more admirable than the latter. The Hertz ad wouldn't fly today. Avis' retort — "We Try Harder" — would likely be regarded with cynicism as well. Something indeed seems to be wrong.

further evidence

I recently heard a talk given by the headmaster of a prestigious New England boarding school. He reflected on his own early days as a student at Phillips Andover Academy (alma mater of former President George Bush) in the late fifties. When home for Christmas break, his father challenged him to explain his low Algebra grade. He began to explain how the teacher was prejudiced against him when his father cut him off and exclaimed, "Don't give me that! You're going to meet a lot of people in life who are prejudiced against you. Buckle down and meet the challenge!" He returned to Andover with greater resolve.

This seemed like a nice anecdote about the "good old days" until he concluded with the commentary that today he regularly gets calls from parents who want their children transferred from a particular academic section because of a prejudicial teacher. Scores of headmasters nodded in cynical agreement.

In the movie "Hoosiers," there is a scene where a father drags his son on to the basketball court to make his peace with Gene Hackman, the coach. The son had blown up at the coach's drill sergeant approach and stormed out of practice. The father's approach brought thousands of Baby Boomers back to our school days. If you didn't see the movie, suffice it to say that this father in his farming overalls did not say:

"Mr. Hackman, what was it you said to Johnny, which caused him to act out so aggressively?"

Can a movie about the fifties tell us anything about the new millennium?

After all, a great deal has changed since the fifties, including the farmer.² A return to the fifties isn't possible or desirable,³ but a return to the value of demanding one's best is essential. What happened?

Consider these somewhat brash statements and observations. Perhaps they help to explain the broken trust between home and school — parents and teachers — and some of the forces that govern it.

a. this is the first generation of american kids that didn't go to sunday school.

I recently came across a group of eager freshmen engaged in some friendly hallway banter. My eye caught that of the ringleader, and I offered him a little banter of my own: "Let he who is without sin cast the first stone." One of the students in the group responded, "Boy, Mr. Gauld, you've got a way with words." After I admitted that I had plagiarized this phrase and divulged my source, I pondered where I learned it. I couldn't remember because it was transferred culturally, through osmosis, as it was for all who attach significance to it.

For generations, Sunday school served as a method for the transfer of a common culture. It was there that the basic tenets of our Judeo-Christian heritage were taught to our young people: the lessons of the Ten Commandments, the Golden Rule, love of thy neighbor, etc. There was a critical mass of families who subscribed to this approach and helped maintain a collective wisdom within society. In the '60s and '70s, people rejected traditional religious observance in favor of a more independent approach to spiritual fulfillment. When we eliminated the restrictive nature of church, we also eliminated a source of our collective wisdom.

We at Hyde do not call for a return to church. We merely note that the departure from it was not replaced with anything of substance, and we are reaping some distasteful repercussions. The distinction between right and wrong is increasingly blurred among young people. The Values Clarification emphasis of the '70s left a fear of indoctrination in its wake and created a values-neutral model for school and family, a model that has failed to produce a common paradigm of character.

Aristotle defined character as the habit of making right decisions. In the '70s "right" was left to the eye of the beholder. Right vs. wrong became a subjective distinction and thus, very difficult to enforce objectively.

b. these are kids whose parents went to woodstock.

I acknowledge a deep regret for having missed this momentous event but fear that the adulation of it has created somewhat of a monster. Today's kid possesses great savvy when it comes to his or her personal rights. Perhaps this reflects the fact that today's parents fought hard for their rights on college campuses, in the streets, with their parents and in the workplace. They were also extremely successful in teaching their kids how to utilize rights. However, this utility is not complemented with a solid comprehension of duty or responsibility.

Emerson likened freedom to a horse that has to be ridden somewhere. Rather than view rights as "means to ends," today's kid views them as synonymous with "license," or as ends in themselves. To return to the Sunday school analogy, it's important to remember that our laws and our rights have their genesis in our Judeo-Christian heritage. They are symbols intended to represent that heritage. Today they are too often engaged outside of the context of this heritage.

c. we need a moral equivalent of mom.

At the turn of this century, philosopher William James promoted the notion of a Moral Equivalent of War. He realized that nations would ultimately require a substitute for warfare as a method for settling disputes. This vision contributed to the eventual establishment of the United Nations. Today we need to pursue a "Moral Equivalent of Mom," and we need to do so with enterprising curiosity.

One of my earliest memories concerns an incident when I stole a pack of gum from a supermarket while running errands with my mother. We were on our way home when I stupidly opened the pack and began unwrapping a piece for my chewing enjoyment. When Mom called me on it, my unlikely story of how my nursery school teacher had awarded me the gum as a prize for great deeds and achievements didn't wash. She turned the car around and didn't need to tell me that we were going back to the store, and that I was going to face the music. I don't remember the events after that, but my mother's message was very clear: "Son, I've got all day. Before we're through here, you're going to learn that this is unacceptable no matter how long it takes."

Think back on your own school days. Chances are good that you returned home from school every day at 3:00 to find a woman named Mom who saw it

as her primary function to help you grow up properly with high standards of moral character. That model of parenting was abandoned in the late '60s due to its chauvinistic characteristics and lack of economic feasibility. However, that model was not replaced with anything that comes close to Mom in the character development department.

Nature, abhorring a vacuum, has run its course. Day care, highly competitive pre-school admissions and latchkey arrangements may have done much to eliminate the chauvinism problem, but they can't touch Mom in the other arenas. It would be difficult to argue that the old model was eliminated primarily in the interests of kids. It was expelled to improve the economic, personal and professional lives of adults. Our next move must be for the benefit of our kids.

d. initial fascination: CD, MTV, VCR

A kindergarten teacher I know recently noted that kids seem to have less capacity for self-amusement and self-entertainment than they did even a decade ago. She noted that the children of today are better observers than participants. Perhaps we should have listened more closely decades ago when architect Frank Lloyd Wright referred to TV as "chewing gum for the eyes."

We Baby-Boomers amused ourselves with games like "hide-and-seek," or daydreamed along with The Beatles. Why run around out in the woods — if you are fortunate enough to find some⁴ — if you can play Nintendo inside? Why ponder the meaning of "I Am the Walrus" — much less play it backwards at 78 rpm looking for clues about the "death" of Paul, as a group of us did one fall afternoon in the Hyde Mansion in 1968 — if you can have MTV fill in the blanks 24 hours a day?

Don't get me wrong. I like MTV. What concerns me is the fact that I am not going to reach my history class unless I become an entertainer myself. The attention spans are shorter each year.

e. teacher: "what is a word that begins with X?"

student: "ex-husband."

This exchange reportedly took place in an American classroom in upstate New York.⁵ Shows like *Ozzie & Harriet*, *Donna Reed*, and *My Three Sons* seem almost humorous when compared with the family of today, family roles and dynamics having changed so much as to render them obsolete. My wife

recalls that "the divorcée" lived next door when she was growing up. How out of date that characterization seems today!

I remember my parents and grandparents engaged in a discussion of politics when I was a boy. My father dismissed the potential challengers to Lyndon Johnson: Goldwater was too much of a "radical," and Nelson Rockefeller would never get elected because he had been "divorced." There was a subtle stigma attached to the term, which applied whether the divorcée lived next door or ran for president.

Today the divorcée is common enough to not require labeling, and we have had a president who has been divorced. On the one hand, our society has accepted that the roles have changed. On the other, we haven't made many adjustments in response to this.

f. collective wisdom

Sometimes I meet families who fall into a syndrome we sometimes refer to as "the operation was a success, but the patient died." Parents in these families proudly point out that their children do attend Sunday school, that they themselves never attended Woodstock, that Mom is in the home, and that TV viewing is limited and monitored. Then they defy me to explain why everything isn't running right in their homes.

Such families do need to be encouraged to continue to fight the good fight, but this is where the notion of collective wisdom applies. In the good old days not only were my/your parents doing these things, everybody else's parents were doing them as well. I was held accountable in my friends' homes in addition to my own.⁶

A positive peer pressure existed, that went along neighborhood lines. In fact, a "bad" family stuck out like a sore thumb. I remember two younger kids down the street who seemed to live lives free of parental constraint. While lying in bed late at night, I could hear them yelling and playing at an hour that was way past my bedtime, let alone theirs. However, they were an enigma more than a bad influence. The neighborhood possessed a set of unified norms that generated a collective wisdom capable of absorbing a few families who went against the grain. There were more of us than there were of them.

Parents fighting the good fight today don't enjoy majority status and don't benefit from this collective wisdom.

conclusion

At Hyde School, we work with hundreds of families each year. Over half of the 50 states are represented in our enrollment. Our conclusions are based on trends we have observed that cross a matrix of demographics and geography. Our work over 35 years has caused us to put a great deal of stock in some basic assumptions:

1. Every human being possesses unique potential.
2. Family (n) 1: a growing child and a committed adult.
3. We value attitude over aptitude, effort over ability, and character over talent.
4. We are accountable for our actions.
5. We strive to live our lives in accordance with Five Words and Five Principles.⁷

Demanding the best is hard because we risk popularity when we do this. As parents, you risk the stability of your relationship with your kids. Similarly, we teachers must sometimes choose between being liked and being respected.

Kids are kids. The Hyde kids of today are playing the hands they've been dealt just as all of us did and continue to do today. I like working with kids as much today as I did when I started teaching, and I'm not a Don Quixote. The answers for Hyde School, its students and its parents lie in the future, not in the past. I look forward to a future that will find the three of us working together to find them.

Malcolm W. Gauld, 1991

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notes

1. Hertz Rent-A-Car
2. Historian Henry Steele Commager summed up some of the problems of our day with a simple observation: "I don't know anyone anymore who has actually milked cows."
3. Another father in another movie on the fifties, *The Dead Poets Society*, presents the flip side of the good old days.
4. A comedian recently defined a suburban development as a place where they plow down the trees and name the streets after them.
5. A testament to the power of television occurred during a spelling test in a Texas elementary school. When the teacher asked the class to spell the word "relief," she reportedly received the following answer from some of her students: "R-o-l-a-i-d-s."
6. Family catechism is strong stuff. Consider this anecdote about corn-on-the-cob and etiquette: In New Hampshire, August and corn-on-the-cob are synonymous. As a kid I always wanted to enjoy this delicacy at a particular friend's home because his parents permitted the informal practice of rolling the entire ear in a community stick of butter. My mother considered this crude and required us to cut a pat off of the stick and apply the butter with one's knife. My friends and I never discussed our differing family customs but accepted that we "rolled" in his house and employed the more formal approach in mine.

Now scan ahead 25 years later to a recent summer. My boyhood pal brought his family for a visit in August, and we had a cookout at my sister's home. My sister's son was having difficulty preparing his corn, and my friend's wife offered to lend a hand. My friend's expression turned to horror as he caught a glimpse of his wife beginning to instruct my nephew in the fine art of rolling. He nervously interjected and suggested something about doing it another way. My jaw dropped and I said, "You remember?"

He replied with a smile, "You're damn right I do!"

7. Words: Courage, Integrity, Leadership, Curiosity, Concern

Principles:

Destiny	Each of us is gifted with unique potential.
Humility	We believe in a power beyond ourselves.
Conscience	We attain our best through character and conscience.
Truth	Truth is our primary guide.
Brother's Keeper	We help others achieve their best.

HYDE

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www.hyde.edu

Bath, ME Campus

616 High Street

Bath, ME 04530-5002

Tel (207) 443-5584

Fax (207) 443-1450

Woodstock, CT Campus

150 Route 169

P.O. Box 237

Woodstock, CT 06281-0237

Tel (860) 963-9096

Fax (860) 963-0164

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