



ENTITLED KIDS OR FAILING PARENTS?

*“The safest place for ships is in the harbor,
but that’s not why they were built”*

—Anonymous

Frankly, it was a brilliant plan that my friend and I had worked out, especially in our fifteen-year-old minds. We had permission to miss a part of class to go across the street from school to the athletic facilities to have our pictures taken for the yearbook. Picture taking was notoriously unpredictable, so why not just say it took longer and have a little fun in the meantime? Sure, it ended up being almost three hours of cutting class, but we had that covered, too. We were “confused,” we plotted to say, and thought we were supposed to stick around and take photos for a different sport later. By the time we realized that they were not doing those pictures after all, it was near lunch, so we just went on to eat rather than disrupt the last few minutes coming back into class. We were being thoughtful, and in accepting a small part of the blame—we did *technically* blow off the last five minutes or so of class—we were even being accountable.

Of course all of that was “horse hockey,” as my staunchly Church of the Nazarene granddad used to say, being resolutely incapable of uttering a curse word. But when we were inevitably summoned to the office of Mr. Kilmer, our wise and utterly humorless principal, we delivered the pre-packaged excuse-making like an Oscar-

winning dramatic performance. We had all the right inflection, tone, pregnant pauses, and thoughtful concern. We sold it! Even looking back now I have to say the performance was flawless!

Wise old Mr. Kilmer, who routinely in those days dealt with such falderal dismissively on his way to three swats with what he liked to call “the board of education,” sat in stunned silence. He apparently recognized a certain level of genius in our argument as well. “Well boys, you got me. I just don’t know what to say. It seemed pretty clear to me that you two had cut class, but after hearing your version of events I admit...I’m the one who’s confused. I guess we ought to just call your dads and have them come down here and help us sort this all out. Maybe they can help us make sense of this.”

My friend and I looked at each other as our heads went from confident and upright to our chins racing to see which could be buried further into our chests. Poof! Just like that, it was over. Our plan suddenly had about as much credibility as a politician promising fiscal responsibility. “There’s no need for that,” my friend choked out in defeat after a long, ugly pause that Mr. Kilmer allowed to hang there like the bad guy at the end of the noose in an old B-movie western, left dangling as a reminder to other bad guys not to mess with the sheriff. “That will just make this much worse. You might as well give us the licks.” Three swats each to both behinds from the aforementioned “board of education,” and one very proud smirk on Mr. Kilmer’s face later, and the two would-be geniuses had been dispatched.

Then there was the time my mom had to go to school to talk to Mr. Kilmer about me. (Mr. Kilmer and I spent a lot of quality time together, unfortunately.) This time, Mom initiated the conversation and she was steaming mad. I had been involved in a verbal altercation with my band director over an issue that I can no longer remember. In his anger, and no doubt sheer frustration at dealing with my smart-aleck, back-talking ways, he grabbed hold of me by the lapel, and in the heat of the moment, let one hand slip up around my neck. He never applied pressure and was not trying to choke me *per se*, but

it was clearly inappropriate and today would arguably be considered far worse. I know I did not run home to tell Mom about it because I knew I had initiated the confrontation, as I was somewhat known for doing in my often out-of-control youth, and I knew there would be no sympathy from the lady who had endured more of that kind of behavior than anyone else. But somehow she found out about it, grabbed me, and off we went to see Mr. Kilmer.

In retrospect, I remember Mr. Kilmer being very quiet and deferential to my mom, something the old football coach in him did not easily allow. Mom was on a roll. She let it be known that under no circumstances was it ever appropriate to choke, or even pretend to choke, a student and she would not stand for it. I remember thinking, *"This is good! Go mom! Don't let these people by with this!"* She even had Mr. Kilmer getting in line: "Yes, Mrs. Youngblood, I agree with you," he said a couple of times in quiet, somber tones. I loved it! Finally, I was getting the justice that had so long eluded me! After getting her point across clearly and forcefully, however, my mother betrayed me. "I know this kid, and I know he can run his mouth in ways that makes you *want* to choke him. If that happens you bring him down here and bust his butt with that paddle all you want and you will have my blessing in doing so!" she said to my utter disgust. *What!?! Wait a minute! You were doing so well! What happened?*

Indeed it was a different time when we were boys and girls. Not just a different time, it was a different world.

We sometimes get caught in the delusional belief that everything would be better if we just went back to the way things used to be. But for all our nostalgia for the "good old days," we might also remember they were not perfect. Smoking and drinking while pregnant was common and horribly unhealthy, as was lead-based paint. Child-proof lids and seat belts have saved countless lives since being introduced, and any child riding bikes or skateboards without a helmet is needlessly risking traumatic brain injury with the simplest of falls. And yet...

We could use a little of the common sense of yesteryear. In the two encounters I had with Mr. Kilmer (yes, there were many more, but there is a practical limit to the number of pages one can put in a book!), he knew exactly what he could count on with my parents. He knew quite well that if he called my dad, doing shift work at the local gas refining plant, and told him what had happened, my dad would have instructed him right on the phone to deliver the punishment at school, and he would follow it up at home. He also knew if my mom had taken the time to come to the school to see him and she was upset, there was probably a good reason and he should listen.

As was proper, I never knew how Mr. Kilmer dealt with the situation with the band director. I know the band director personally apologized to me and to my mom and that he was gone at the end of the school year. I believe as an adult that was plenty of punishment and seemed to adequately fit the offense better than any lawsuit or dramatic appeal to the school board could have. My mom never gloated or even mentioned it again, except to continue to remind me to watch my back-talking. Only as an adult did it dawn on me that this incident, likely coupled with other flaws, kept the guy from getting his contract renewed—something no kid needs to know since I would have learned every wrong lesson from it at the time.

My mom, on the other hand, knew exactly what a loud mouth kid I was and wanted to make it very clear that she fully supported and expected me to face the consequences of my own actions. Everyone did their job, boundaries were clearly defined, and the rambunctious kid was summarily put back on the leash.

Would either scenario play out the same way today? Would a principal feel as confident threatening to call a parent or would the kid jump all over it, knowing Mommy or Daddy would continue to fight his fights, just like they always did? Would a similar “choking incident” get today’s parents to the school for a direct conversation with the principal, or would they consult with their attorney first? Could it have been handled as firmly and resolutely as Mr. Kilmer

successful failure

handled it, or would union reps and a school board hearing be necessary? I have no doubt that things are not the way they used to be, but when it comes to parenting, I can't help but think things have gotten much worse.