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Trust Friendship Over Fear

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On the last evening of his winter break during his college freshman year, our youngest of three children, Tucker, blessed my wife, Sue, and me by agreeing to go out for dinner with us. I say, “blessed” because Sue and I know and regret but can’t honestly deplore that we are not the most sought-after date in town by our kids any more.

Of course, we were all ears at dinner. Tucker was in a talkative mood that evening, and, in his characteristically direct way, he asked us, “So, how do you find a job?” We’d been talking about summer jobs, but Tucker took it one step further. “I mean, how do you find out what you want to do after college?”

Sue and I launched into the usual array of confusing answers—find what you love, try to be practical, follow your dream, stay open for any opportunity that might come along—when Tucker looked down at his hands under the table. Sue and I knew, of course, that he was texting, a practice we have gone to great lengths to discourage during dinner.

Seeing that I was annoyed, Tucker looked up and said, “It’s just my B.O.B., Pops.”

I smiled. B.O.B. His band of brothers. I have encouraged my kids since they were very young to pursue and develop friendships. I often quoted them Yeats, “Think where man’s glory most begins and ends, and say my glory was I had such friends.” So I was thrilled that during high school Tucker had developed a band of brothers, or B.O.B., with whom, many months after graduation, he communicates every day.

My son developed these friendships at his boys' independent school just outside of Boston, right around the corner from where we live.

Developing deep friendships can take a back seat to developing alluring resumes.

The boys came together in high school around a friend who was in some trouble. They helped him out and became a tight-knit group in the process. This group of young men, 15-strong, gave me the best answer to Tucker's question about how to get a job or pick a career. "Talk to your band of brothers. I'm sure they have some great ideas and great contacts as well."

"That's what I was doin' texting, Pops," Tucker said with a wink toward Sue and me.

That Tucker has his B.O.B., and that they actually do communicate with each other every day, is a great gift for them all. They have no idea, yet, what a powerful force they are, and can always be, in each other's lives. Or, maybe they do.

I worry, though, that the rest of world does not. I worry people of all ages don't take friendship nearly seriously enough, that it is seen as a luxury, a frill, and not the life-changing force that it ought to be.

In today's world, developing deep and rugged friendships can take a back seat to developing plush and alluring resumes, as childhood and schooling become increasingly utilitarian.

Thanks to our amazing technology, three billion new capitalists now compete for jobs from which they used to be pretty much excluded. For good reason, kids—young adults—coming out of school feel far less secure than they did just a generation ago. This competition and uncertainty has led, understandably, to parents and students alike feeling intense pressure to excel, which may lead them to overlook things—like friendship—that don't make it onto resumes.

I worry that we are allowing a pragmatism engendered by insecurity and fear to rule our lives too much. And when fear rules, madness ensues. What parent has not heard about, if not suffered through, agonizing years—not just days or weeks—spent in abject terror over the college admission process?

Parents often forget that what really does maximize the chances of developing a great life are not admission to the most prestigious colleges or top GPA's or a shelf of trophies but rather deeply felt and enduring attitudes, like grit, confidence, a growth-mindset, optimism, industry, and joy in the pursuit of a treasured goal, attitudes that can be taught and that every child can develop. Not knowing or believing this provable truth, parents instead, out of fear, ignorance and, yes, love, let themselves and their children suffer and warp during years that should bolster them and give them strength forever. Madness indeed.

And how many times have we witnessed, and perhaps been traumatized by, a crisis at school caused by a first grader innocently drawing a picture of a gun? Rather than the teacher calmly sitting down with the student to find out what's on his mind, the child is all but Mirandized as his parents are called in for an emergency meeting prompted by the teacher's and principal's and school's attorney's fear of other parents anonymously expressing concern for the safety and well-being of their children in this "dangerous" environment—otherwise known as first grade. It is madness, madness of our own making, divorced from reality, as madness always is.

Trust amongst us all retreats every day, eroding like the beachfronts in my hometown of Chatham, on Cape Cod. We are, day by day, losing the kinds of connections between each other that not only facilitate finding jobs and celebrating good times, but also help us in working out problems, handling catastrophes, and feeling good about life.

The fear and anxiety in our culture have grown especially intense since ... since when? I think of Columbine, April 1999, as the watershed moment, when fear ascended like a blood-soaked ghost while trust, cooperation, reason and common sense began to break down.

Out of fear, instead of being given the bold advice, “be yourself,” children started to be told, “be appropriate.” Rough edges got polished lest a child not “fit in” or be deemed weird (this, in a country that was founded by weirdos). On the other hand, the force of political correctness, the natural byproduct of a society high on fear and low on trust, demonized and punished in draconian fashion any slight step outside the norm.

Instead of being told to “go out and play,” children became controlled, scheduled all day and into the night. Instead of playing pickup games in their free time, travel teams consumed that free time. Dreams gave way to pragmatism. To chill out, kids turned not to each other but to video games. Whimsy yielded to agendas. “Have fun,” became “get serious.”

Fear, not wisdom, has driven these changes—much the same as the fear generated by 9/11 has led many in our country’s leadership to overstate the general threat of terrorism, then overreact

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adversity of any kind.

by putting in place overly harsh and restrictive measures. It is hard to know whether our leaders—much like the principal who calls the emergency meeting over the first grader’s drawing—are

responding to a true threat, or protecting themselves from blame should the unlikely happen.

Fear has become a potent force in all of our institutions, especially communities and schools. It is serving to undermine and

weaken today's schools, families and communities, and childhood itself. Otherwise sane and trusting parents become fearful and secretive because they fear being blamed by even more fearful parents for ... just about anything.

Whether we date the intensification of fear as starting with Columbine or 9/11, this disconnecting and destructive virus has been spreading for some time now. The sickness is slow, so you don't wake up one day and say, "This is crazy! Life is not that dangerous! What happened to trust?" Rather, we are like frogs in a pot of cold water under which someone turned up the heat 15-or-so years ago.

Urge your children to tap into the full power friendship can provide.

Now, slowly, we are getting boiled in a pot of fear. Slowly, without noticing it, we are losing our humanity and simply hunkering down, trying to protect ourselves as we do all we can to inhibit spontaneity lest it be deemed (you guessed it) inappropriate.

Slowly, we are losing not only the ability but also the desire to talk through a problem without an attorney, to call a parent on the assumption that parent will feel like a member of the same team, to listen to an opposing point of view without instantly pigeonholing it and leaping up with a rebuttal or shutting the speaker out as bad or dangerous.

I miss the days when you could assume another person, say another parent at your child's school, would react to whatever problem that might arise with common sense and a desire to cooperate and work it out. Today's endless rules, procedures, laws and policies set in place only to minimize liability sadden me. Where have the days gone when, as parents, we all shared liability and took responsibility for each other's kids? The Chatham of my youth was not perfect, but if a parent looked outside the window

and saw a child misbehaving, that parent went outside, took care of the matter, and left it at that. Now? Well, you know what happens now.

While today's parents are, by and large, less bigoted and prejudiced than they were when I was growing up, they are, on the other hand, far less trusting, far more fearful, and far less invested in connection and community than they were a generation or two ago. Just as the Rodgers and Hammerstein song tells us "you've got to be carefully taught" to develop bigotry and prejudice, so you have to be carefully taught to develop fear, mistrust and paranoia.

That's why Tucker's band of brothers gives me such hope. Tucker and his friends bonded by working out a problem that their parents, reflexively, would have asked the police and attorneys to solve. They took a big chance, because they trusted each other. Many parents would have been shocked, had they known the details. But these kids discovered their own power, their ability as a group to solve what individually they could not have solved, and what the adults would only have made much worse. In so doing they discovered, firsthand, truths that not only don't get taught in society today, but are actively discouraged and even scorned, trivialized or regarded as dangerously delusional.

They are the truths that used to fortify our nation, truths upon whose enduring strength this country was built: that when you're in trouble, you turn to your neighbor for help; that friendship is the best tool you have to deal with adversity of any kind; that a person is innocent until proven not to be; that united we stand, and divided we fall.

These boys discovered the power of trust, of friendship, of working problems out without attorneys, principals, heads or parents. They learned what so many, many kids, as well as their

parents, never learn: the power that belief in each other bestows on the entire group.

Can the band of brothers get into mischief and use “bad judgment” at times? You bet. I put “bad judgment” in quotes, because it’s become such a buzzword. How soon we adults forget!

And let me ask you, even as you (and I) thank God that you (and I) were spared the disastrous consequences our own bad judgment back then might have led to, aren’t we also glad we had that somewhat protected time called childhood and adolescence to prepare for adulthood? Aren’t we glad we weren’t the total goodie-goodies our parents always told us to be? And doesn’t whatever success we’ve achieved today depend somewhat on our having had those years and exercised that bad judgment?

Prince Hal outgrew Falstaff, just as your kids will outgrow the “bad influences” you fear. I can almost hear you asking, “How do you know?” Well, of course, I don’t know. That generation upon generation has learned to find its way should reassure you, though. All that love you’ve invested in your children will pay off. You can take that to the bank. After 35 years practicing child psychiatry, I can tell you: most of the time, things work out.

If you want to maximize the chances that they will work out—and who doesn’t harbor the occasional doubt—do what you no doubt have done, if you are the kind of person who would read this essay. Love your child with all your heart and soul. Say “no” when you need to. And, as he or she heads into high school and college, urge him or her to find a band of brothers.

Urge your children to tap into the full power friendship can provide. Urge your children to develop the trust in others that today’s world so pitifully lacks.

Urge your children to usher in a new era, a throwback to bygone days, when one could assume the best in others and find it,

when one could assume common sense would prevail, and when fear did not rule.

After 9/11, I was asked to go on TV and offer advice to parents. I asked my daughter, who was 13 at the time, what I should say. I will never forget what she volunteered with only a moment's reflection. "Daddy, tell the people not to hold back on life out of fear."

It is in each other, in our friends, in our own band of brothers, that we find release from fear and the boldness to plunge ahead into life's unlit future.

Urge your kids to do it now. Get in the habit of finding others to hang out with and believe in. And, while you're at it, do it yourself.

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