

“When I was a boy of fourteen, my father was so ignorant I could hardly stand to have the old man around.  
But when I got to be twenty-one, I was astonished at how much he had learned in seven years.”

-- Mark Twain

An old saying tells us that the best we can do for our children is to give them roots, and then give them wings. The age of the teenager is the unfolding of those wings in a maddening and unpredictable fashion. One moment they are reasonable, the next moment they are not. They complain about family, but exclude them, and they cry foul. As parents, we want to include them, but we do so at our own peril. They can cooperate, but then suddenly suffer bouts of senseless independence. They sleep and eat, then sleep some more. In between they study, avoid chores and hang out with friends on line and off line. For those of you who have yet to experience this time in your child's life, buckle your seat belts. You're in for a bumpy ride. But experienced parents tell me, like Mark Twain's observation, teenagers return to their senses about the time of college graduation.

My wife and I have four children. Two are teenagers. To date, we have been spared from an interest in cars and girls. But our teenage boys suffer lethargic crudeness, an inability to speak without grunting, excessive computer use and fierce independence. Yet I recall with clarity, these same teenage boys hanging on to my leg when they each went on their first Indian Guides Campout. They needed me and looked to me with awe and wonder. I was their constant buddy. Now as teenagers, being their buddy is not part of their plan.

Although on occasion, they still like to do things with me. This summer my two eldest sons and I sailed the Florida Keys on a Scout trip. Out at sea, when we moored at our first reef for snorkeling, we were greeted by four big barracuda. They were hanging in the water about four feet from the surface, all lined up facing our sailboat, curious and menacing. Some of the crew exclaimed, “Whoa! Dude!” (This is the adolescent equivalent of “Holy Cow!”) The barracuda were huge, but just as with teenagers, don't irritate them and they won't bite. As the crew paired up into buddies, my fourteen year old son, Tom, quickly said, “Hey, Dad! I'll be your buddy.” I was surprised, but happy to snorkel with my son. We moved to the stern, put on our gear and leaped off into the turquoise water of the reef.

As we snorkeled, we kept bumping into each other. I'd swim away and still bump into Tom. I'd dive towards a reef and there was Tom at my side; rise to the surface and Tom was right with me. Tom stayed with me in the water, stroke for stroke and dive for dive. Why? Then it dawned on me. This was Tom's equivalent of leg hugging on his first Indian Guides Campout. The barracuda had him spooked. Of course he would never say so, but his behavior said it for him. “Well what do you know?” I thought. “He still needs his old man.” He stuck with me all the way back to the boat.

After we climbed up on the stern, we sat there awhile holding our fins and snorkel in one hand, pushing our salty hair back with the other, squinting into the bright daylight, spitting and blinking, clearing our mouths and eyes of salt water while looking out at the blue ocean, the big barracuda, and a school of yellow fish skirting the hull of the boat.

“How did you like the dive, Tom?”

“Cool.”

“Are you glad you're here?”

“Sure Dad. Thanks for taking me.”

What a nice moment. Then I reached back in time a few years, pulled a meaningful phrase from many fond memories and said, “Pal's Forever, huh, Tom?”

“Oh ! Don't make me puke Dad!”

That was the end of that moment. Maybe I reached too far back for a teenager. But pity the parent who never cultivated the relationship with his child; who never spent the time that we spend with our children. You're investing in a future teenager who will alternately need you and need to get away from you. This is what we do as parents: provide roots and wings. Indian Guides and Indian Princesses help with the roots. The wings come later. For now, keep cultivating.

Peace,

John C. Lorenzen, Federation Chief Keokuk