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WINGS



The moment I saw this picture I recognized myself – my most primordial self. Three arms around my son, the fourth anchoring us. Every mother knows that this is the safest place in the world for her child. Rational and wise parenting in the midst of such a deep visceral connection has been my personal Everest for nearly eighteen years. In all my orangutan fervor to get John solidly rooted, I lost sight of my main job as a parent: to prepare him to leave me.

The process of shifting the family structure from roots to wings, *hands-on guidance to hands-off availability*, is meant to be deliberate and steady. Separation from the parent is as essential and natural as separation from the diaper, the security blanket and the training wheels. Be that as it may, theoretical knowledge had me as prepared for the letting go as Lamaze classes had me prepared for 16 hours of labour. We all have a crushing moment when the eventuality really hits us. Mine was the day I taught John to ride a bike – I remember being so intentional about balancing support with freedom and then suddenly grasping that *this is what he'll always need me to do*. The little boy who raced to greet me when I picked him up at the Education Station would grow into the young man who mastered the tuck-and-roll in order to shave ten seconds off his time with me as I dropped him at school.

Rev. T.D. Jakes says children are like arrows. They need to be directed. You aim arrows but you don't push them. You pull them *away* from their target – this pulling away creates and stores potential energy that gets transferred to the arrow and causes its projection. Hard times when our children must pull themselves up by their bootstraps are just the arrows being pulled back so that when they're released they thrust forward. This wisdom implies that I shouldn't stew about the mistakes I made, what John missed, the times I took it out on someone beneath me on the food chain. It all served to propel him into a better future, according to this man of the cloth. I'm not enlightened enough to be a non-stewer nor smart enough to understand Newtonian energy but I've caught on to the incontrovertible truth that raising a child is the hardest job in the world and raising a teenager is exponentially harder.

My intentions were pure, my path clear when John was born. I was in the thick of my graduate years at ASU; amid all the research, academicians, adolescent and pediatric internships, I was of

the mind I had it in the bag. My dossier of Child Development studies had me expecting that as long as I did my part, John's responses were more or less predictable. I was a good student so I played it by the books. As soon as he could string a few words together, I began teaching him *how* to think by petitioning his rationale whenever he had a request. "Can we have gummy bears for dinner?" or "can we get a pit viper?" was met with "convince me that's a good idea." Unless those conversations took place in a grocery line where onlookers were judging me, he was pretty good about accepting "I'm not convinced, move on." That all changed on his 13th birthday when he began using his artful deliberating powers for evil. The very analytic skills I had taught him now converged like a red laser on one single mission: *wear mother down*. He was like a homing missile locked in on its target, tracking me until impact. My best evasive maneuvers barely slowed him down. I'm still mystified as to how his adolescent brain had conveniently erased the essence of the teaching which was learn how to reason well but remember I'm the parent.

Problem-solving training met the same demise. Very early on John learned that when he made a problem he needed to come to me with a plan for solving it. In theory, this eliminated my need to create a consequence for him. I was aiming for no nagging, reminding, warning, lecturing or bartering; all that would just make it my problem. No rewards for doing the right thing – that would detract from his internal pride. In hindsight, I see I was a tad overconfident due to my grasp of operant conditioning, a rather involved behavioristic doctrine of animal psychology based on punishments and rewards. According to all the research, it's a robust, universal model that pertains to everyone from fat cat international moguls to chickens. The sole empirical exception, it turns out, is the teenager and I got sucked into the vortex of his problems as surely as light into a black hole.

The books underscore that, to the extent parents resist the evolution of their children, they'll be resented and rebelled against. We're instructed to give them all the age-appropriate choices possible within the confines of safety. John was picking out his clothes at three (I still miss the sailor outfits) and I commend myself for not saying a word during the Muscle Shirt, Tie and Batman Cape phases. When he stopped eating coins, he got allowance that was divided into thirds - spending, college and charity - and he chose where each fund would go. The whole choice thing went without a hitch until puberty hit, at which point the system broke down in concert with all manner of ill-conceived decisions made by him. As is always the case with breakdowns, this one had all the potential for a *breakthrough* but at the time my clarity and resolve were eclipsed by a steady stream of crap. Chuck Yeager, the first man to fly faster than the speed of sound, stepped out of his plane and reported, "*Just before I broke through the sound barrier is when the cockpit shook the most.*" I imagine this observation took on a whole new meaning for him when his four children reached their teens.

This essay is for parents as unsuspecting and flummoxed as me, up there in the cockpit hanging on for dear life in a maze of emotions we can't begin to make sense of. In the spirit of self-care, I try to blame others where I can so I made it my business to investigate just who and what was responsible for the hornet's nest that was my son's early adolescence. Like all my essays, this is a mix of personal successes and failures, clinical experience and research findings. This one in particular, though, hits very close to home because of my love for the dog. Mine is the age-old story of "If I Only Knew Then..." but with a paradoxical twist: if I could turn back time to 13-

year-old John, I'm pretty sure I wouldn't change a thing. He taught me that, and much more, in the five years since.

Damn you, Orville and Wilbur

The psychology books call it *developmental individuating*, a fancy term for preparing to leave the nest. The texts had me prepared for resistance but not for the Hostile Takeover that was my experience. The problem with hostile takeovers is that they're hostile and almost always unexpected. Overnight, John's language, clothes, "music," all of it was the Anti-me. I was 25+ years into recovery from alcohol and making it my life's purpose to help others do the same when he began smoking weed and drinking. Where I used to find Ninja Turtles in the tree house, I was now finding beer bong. Anti-me. There was an abrupt shift from house rules and my advice to peer rules and their counsel, such as it was. That felt to me like losing power and I get frightened and crabby when that happens. I think I speak for orangutans everywhere when I say that we feel safer enforcing the rules of play than simply sharing our ideas and inspiring them to make good choices. And in our defense, it's easier to pass the baton to someone who's headed in the right direction. My son's peer group was known as The Usual Suspects.

The seed of most great technologies and scientific discoveries is someone observing how nature works. One of the common threads woven into all of nature is the wisdom to go *with* a current that's larger than you (there are some hapless exceptions like the salmon but it serves them right for trying to go home again). To go *with* is energizing and empowering; to go *against* is depleting and frightening. Integral to good parenting is understanding the current you're in and then staying awake. The turbulence of the rapids carrying our kids to adulthood is *necessary* for healthy development. Everywhere in nature, from the butterfly struggling its way out of the cocoon to Pluto breaking free from the Asteroid Belt, we see things evolving into a higher form *because* of the struggle. We should no more resist our teenager's drive toward independence than we would resist childbirth when labour starts. Transitioning from womb to world is typically not smooth, John's certainly wasn't (although it did have all the elements of a good story – perilous obstacles, nerve-wracking moments, handsome doctor, happy ending). Tough for the mother, tougher on the baby who's yanked from its comfort zone in one fell swoop. Making the break as a teenager, one hand in childhood dependence, the other straining to break free from the gravitational field of the home to find their new rightful place, is yet another harrowing about-face. This one is accompanied by years of labour pains and there's no epidural. As I watched my young man storm-chasing, posturing, floundering, I thought *this is what poor Mrs. Wright must have felt like when her boys began fashioning their first airplane.*

How a teenager is like a subatomic particle

A hundred years after Max Planck proposed that the teeniest form of energy comes in tiny lumps called quanta, it's still a theory that's shrouded in mystery. No one knows how or why these lumps work. They not only go against common sense, they go against all known laws of physics. You can't ever know where a quantum is in space and time; in fact, it can be in more than one place at a given time as if to throw you off the trail. It can spin both clockwise and counterclockwise simultaneously. This will sound eerily familiar if you're the parent of a

teenager and the next few paragraphs are intended to shed some light on the source of our whirling dervishes.

Adolescents don't think like the rest of us. It's not their fault. The changes in their physical appearance pale in comparison to the Greek tragedy playing out inside their Mohawk-shaved heads (those of you who didn't get to experience the head shaving and hair-dying missed something really special). As a parent, the timing of my son's brain development is something I intend to take up first thing with whoever checks me in at the Pearly Gates.

Here's the flaw: one of the *last* areas to mature is the prefrontal cortex – the reasoning, rational, moral, sound judgment, goal-setting, impulse control, look-before-you-leap brain. Throw an adult into a brain scanner and you watch this part of the brain and its pathways to and from the emotional centre light up when confronted with a choice, especially an emotional choice. Not so with the teen. The healthy adult brain feels an emotion, then sends the information to a cortex fully equipped with a Pause button, giving us time to consider possible outcomes and reason our way to the best choice. The Pause button is that little gap between the impulse and the action – very underdeveloped in teens. The power in that gap should not be underestimated; *the ability to pause is the foundation of free will*. It literally gives you the choice to step away from the disturbance and consider your options. Think of it as an emotional muscle and, like all muscles, the more you use it the stronger it becomes; the more you don't act on your impulses, the more they lose their control over you. This takes years of practice and is the seat of emotional intelligence. That said, there are plenty of adults who aren't exercising their god-given right to the gap; we can all relate to letting our emotions get the best of us and reacting badly in the moment. It happens fast and we always rue the day. The teen brain feels like that *all the time* because the button is just being installed and the bugs take years to work out. This working out phase is not to be confused with dysfunction; their brains are just not done.

During this growth phase, the neural pathways themselves are being heaped with more myelin, increasing both the speed and accuracy of the trillions of messages constantly being relayed. Here again, the cortex is the last in line which contributes to the teen's lack of critical, practical and abstract thinking. On one hand my 13-year-old son could rapidly compute complex math problems in his head and consolidate vast amounts of information the night before an exam, which I witnessed firsthand because I was in charge of cramming. On the other, he had difficulty organizing simple daily tasks and his capacity to think into the future, and by future I mean dinnertime, was barely superior to that of his basset hound.

Cognitive and emotional development are outcroppings of neural development and not about gaining *more* knowledge as much as qualitative changes in *the way a person thinks*. It's absolutely crucial for parents to recognize that the thoughts and actions of children and adolescents are constrained by the developmental stage they're in. To expect a 6-year-old to have the empathy of a 12-year-old is to put unrealistic expectations on them; to expect a 16-year-old to have a grasp of delayed gratification and future consequences sets up undue conflict, poor self-esteem in the child and a lot of frustration and guilt for the parents.

The mature and reasoning cortex taking its sweet time is not, in and of itself, a problem. The rub is that the more primitive survival brain is up and running like a Swiss watch. This is the part of

the brain that keeps teenagers focused on primal tasks such as finding a mate, elevating their status with peers and seeking pleasure activities such as sex and novelty. Its only consideration is the next 60 seconds, so it leaps well before it looks. The zest for risk-taking and novelty-seeking, intrinsic to the transition into adulthood, has been the bane of my existence for the past five years. To make matters worse for me, teens perceive and experience risk differently than adults do – their brains have them hyper-focused on the challenge to the exclusion of any possible outcome and they are *neurologically* stoked by the presence of others.

Also up and raring to go is the emotional centre of the brain, an unassuming little almond-shaped blob called the amygdala. The amygdala is a drama queen. All information passes through this emotionally charged filter which produces a powder keg when coupled with a sensitive and underdeveloped stress management system and the hormonal bedlam going on in the teenage brain. Whereas adults process information from the reasoning frontal cortex, our teens are operating from their emotional, impulsive, what's-to-become-of-me-in-the-next-minute brains. No one's more awestruck by the five million years of intelligence tucked away in that little section of brain than me, but I'd rather not have it in the driver's seat as John navigates his way through adolescence. Someone's going to get a piece of my mind. Maybe it will be Darwin.

All this growth during adolescence naturally requires more sleep during which the brain consolidates new information and recharges. This is where the teen brain is dealt yet another blow. In puberty, melatonin is released two hours later at night and stays in their systems two hours later each morning, which means they don't feel tired until later at night and they have a harder time waking up in the morning. To add to this, deep, slow-wave sleep gets cut almost by half in your teens. All this can cause sleep disturbances like insomnia and even narcolepsy during the day. Sleep is critical for healthy brain maturation and deprivation is a major contributor to everything from depression to ADHD and certainly decreased emotional control.

Of all the animals, the boy is the most unmanageable. Plato

Also important to the parent knowledge base is a cursory understanding of the differences between girl brains and boy brains. Several brain structures grow differently and at different rates for males and females and their hormonal development is every bit as disparate. A girl's brain gives her stronger social skills, a longer attention span, more ability and finesse in being emotionally supportive and a faster maturation. The boy brain has him all hopped up on competition, danger, sex and assertiveness. Boys of all ages have a primal need to know they're powerful, someone to be reckoned with, a protector, a warrior, a hero. I recall playing Roy Rogers with my brother, another extraordinary John; I wanted to be Dale Evans so we could relate, he needed the gun fights. Although I was teaching gender differences to my Psych students at the time, it was my son's grade two birthday party that really showed me the ropes. I was blind to my rookie mistakes so well-intentioned was I on that ill-fated December 3rd. I rented the party room and put in copious amounts of time preparing game stations and prizes. There were several offers of help from more experienced parents but then they weren't aware of my education in human behavior. John's whole class was invited and 22 of the little hooligans attended. It's all a blur now so I can't say for sure when I came to fully grasp that boys don't follow directions, line up, or wait their turn. I still have flashbacks of the *Can You Guess What This Is?* station where party goers were blindfolded before submerging what was supposed to be

their hands into buckets of various squishy things. The girls were as aghast as I at the egregious rule-breaking that ensued. Another of life's previews of what was to come, but I was too busy feigning my best professorial face and picking bits of meatball out of my hair to take heed.

It's all fun and games until someone ends up in a cone. Animal Hospital billboard

My main point to parents: Keep your eyes open because your teenager's brain makes him a veritable sitting duck when it comes to drugs, alcohol and a host of other risky business. When you take into account even the smattering of puzzle pieces presented here, you can see how easy it would be for a teenager to over-react and make bad decisions in the heat of a moment. There's no way their brains can alert them to the grim reality that just one misstep can have devastating and far-reaching consequences. Driving drunk even one time can lead to disability or death, just one night of excessive drinking or drug use can result in a dangerous fight, an unplanned pregnancy or a sexually transmitted disease.

The statistics are nothing short of tragic. One third of high school students binge drink (five or more drinks in a row). Three quarters have used tobacco, alcohol, pot or cocaine and a whopping one in five meet criteria for addiction (not an easy thing to do). Teens are more likely to black out before they pass out or before their motor coordination is seriously impacted – this means they'll continue to drink, to drive, to have sex and to commit crimes with the choice part of their brains offline. In the face of all the evidence of the structural/functional brain changes and the cognitive impairment caused by marijuana, including the kingpin, de-motivation, one in four teens consider pot harmless. What's more unnerving is that one in five parents agree. Pot smokers are twice as likely to drop out of high school, so what direction do they go from there? All drugs (including nicotine and alcohol) cause chemical imbalances and impair brain connections. Moreover -- *and this understanding is of paramount importance to the hundreds of thousands of parents having trouble with their 20+ year-olds* -- when a young person begins to misuse drugs, he/she effectively *arrests emotional and moral development*. Emotional maturation is the bedrock of insight, judgment and personal strength, moral maturation is the bedrock of a conscience and healthy remorse.

The coup de grace is that teen brains are much more biologically vulnerable to addiction than adult brains; teens show symptoms of nicotine dependence after the first or second time they smoke. Those who try drugs or alcohol as early as fourteen are nearly *seven* times as likely to develop an addiction problem as are those who wait till they're 21. This means that the longer the teen postpones drug and alcohol use, the better their chances of being able to moderate in the future. What parents need to know about addiction is this domino effect: the more addictive the substance, the more dopamine gets released to the reward centres of the brain (dopamine is that neurotransmitter that makes us so euphoric that we're *compelled* to repeat). The more dopamine, the more glutamate (the neurotransmitter that "glues" the euphoria into your memory lest you forget what reduces stress and makes you feel good). There are countless more neurologic dominos but the upshot is that the brain ends up *demanding* the drug, particularly under stress. When these demands were made on me as an addicted teenager, nothing about my choice to drink felt like a choice.

Other sobering statistics related to adolescent decision-making: one in three teens are involved in bullying (physical, cyber, verbal, emotional), either as the bully or the target. Six out of ten are witness to bullying at least *once a day*. A humongous 160,000 students in the U.S. refuse to go to school because they dread being bullied. It doesn't turn out well for the bullies either. Research shows that they often develop a habitual tendency to abuse power; they're increasingly shunned as they reach the higher grades, and over one in four will be convicted of a criminal offense in their adult years. 820,000 young girls become pregnant each year, translating to 34% having at least one pregnancy before they turn 20. Of the girls whose first intercourse happened at age 13 or 14, nearly half report that sex was unwanted or involuntary. Only a third of teenage mothers complete high school. By age 30, only 1% of women who had pregnancies as a teenager have a college degree. 80% of unmarried teenage mothers end up on welfare.

Teen depression, anxiety, pregnancies, addiction, accidental death, suicide – all at an unprecedented high. And there is another extremely significant downside to the abuse of drugs, alcohol, sex, pornography and the like. They make the young person *feel like* an adult, an exhilarated adult, *without requiring anything from them*. The feeling becomes addictive as does the fast, easy way to get the feeling. Our young people are stepping off their authenticity to fit in and feel good, to get something for nothing, and at some point they find themselves terrified of being exposed for what they are (and what they aren't) so they go deeper into hiding. They become actors. They begin to lose old friends, gravitating toward the people who are like them, people who come with an unspoken agreement not to expose one another. These friendships are structured to preserve everyone's mask, everyone's pathology. A certain amount of posing in adolescence is to be expected but what they're hiding behind today is decidedly more dangerous and they're hanging onto it longer than ever before. The longer they hang on, the harder it is to get them back. These young people aren't bad, of course, they're lost.

It is easier to build strong children than to repair broken men. Frederick Douglass

So what can we do about their brains? Knowledge is power. To the extent that we're informed about their neurodevelopment and the world they live in, we can understand the storms (internal and external) *and* anticipate and plan for them. Perhaps even prevent some. We can make sure they're getting good food, exercise and sleep. We can help them make sense of their mood swings, their impulsivity, their sensitivity. We can talk about sex and drugs openly, encourage them to identify their feelings and deal with their stress in healthy ways. We can help them avoid multitasking, help them organize their time and think in terms of priorities. We can encourage diverse activities to help them explore their own unique talents and passions. We can teach them that the extraordinary privilege of having a cell phone and the internet is not to be violated with harmful or divisive communications, but used to connect in harmony and equanimity. We can repeatedly guarantee that whatever they're going through today is a phase, it will pass; they are *evolving* toward a much more settled way of seeing the world.

Adolescence is a one-time biological window of opportunity for the brain to become better, smarter and faster. For many, it's a missed opportunity and a time where life-long vulnerabilities get a foothold. This neurologic window is a *use it or lose it* time for the brain - the pathways that are stimulated and used repeatedly grow stronger; the unused ones wither. This is also a time of pruning the deadwood to make room for some serious blooming. What your teenagers are doing

with their day and who they're spending it with have a profound influence on the brain that will soon be making all their vital life decisions.

The sum of the square roots of any two sides of an isosceles triangle is equal to the square root of the remaining side. Oh joy! Rapture! I got a brain! How can I ever thank you enough? Scarecrow to the Wizard of Oz

We can't give our kids what we don't have and nobody spots a hypocrite quicker than a kid. *Nearly half* of the children in our country under the age of 18 live in a household where an adult engages in risky and excessive substance use. What happens to children raised by parents with a serious dysfunction? Their normal development, including their brain development, is interrupted. A person growing up in the midst of anxiety, unpredictability or chaos spends a disproportionate and dangerous amount of time in the fight-or-flight survival brain concentrating on getting their basic needs met. Abraham Maslow's hierarchical model of human needs elucidates this problem well. Maslow explains that our needs are best understood by arranging them in order of priority; think of them as rungs on a ladder. The lowest rung comprises the most basic and crucial physical needs; safety, food, shelter. When those are met, we're free to climb toward esteem, belonging, love, purpose and finally service. We do not have the energy or ability to aim for these higher-order needs while the lower rungs need our attention.

Children automatically adapt to whatever environment they find themselves in. They subconsciously merge into roles that keep them out of the way of the family pathology but at the same time help the family to meet its needs. To the extent that parents are caught in their own troubles, kids assume parental responsibilities thus interrupting the climb and all too often robbing them of their childhood. The more dysfunctional the home, the more dysfunctional their survival skills and defenses become. This keeps them afloat during their time at home which is a good thing. The downside is that their adaptations become their coping skills, their operating system for managing life. It's hard to talk people out of these behaviors later in life because they were programmed into the brain as *survival imperatives* a long time ago. Maslow's research shows some long-lasting consequences for people who don't get their basic needs met in childhood and that includes the most basic of all, being esteemed by parents. These people are at risk for developing what he calls deficiency needs, those that continue to preoccupy us and keep us stuck in our past, *even when these needs are met later in life*. These are people who are continually seeking love, approval, material things and usually seeking them in all the wrong places. Bottom line: children *need* to feel safe, nurtured and valuable. They need an environment where they are free to be where they should be which is annoying the crap out of us while the development of their brains and their climb can proceed uninterrupted.

A ship is safe in the harbor, but that's not what it was built for. Unknown

I'll never forget the afternoon a very little John came back from the mailbox with a stack of bills in one hand, a letter possessively held away from me in the other declaring, "I'll take this one, it's addressed to *me!*" Not To-the-Parents-of-John Blair. He marched into his room and shut the door so as to protect his privacy. The teaching was clear even through my foolish ape tears. My son's door telling me that anything with his name on it is his alone to open. Life telling me not to hang on too tightly, to get him prepared for independence. Malcolm Gladwell (*Outliers*)

says this requires that our children practice being responsible for themselves, fixing their own problems and dealing with their own pain for *thousands* of hours before departing the nest. If we're doing any of this for them, we're robbing them of the opportunity to become strong and giving them permission to stay irresponsible and immature, thus extending the dependence stage. Essentially, we are clipping their wings. Being treated like a 12-year-old causes you to *feel* like a 12-year-old, and in a 15 or 23 or 33-year-old body this feels like being caged. In *Wild At Heart* (epic book about young men), John Eldredge describes his anguish watching the mighty and noble lion at the local zoo who had become lazy, weary, resigned to his caged life. "*After years of living in a cage, a lion no longer believes it's a lion...When a man feels caged, he no longer believes he's a man...Until a man knows he's a man he will forever be trying to prove he is one, while at the same time shrink from anything that might reveal he is not.*" This epidemic of shrinking young people stuck in the harbor has given rise to an entirely new area of research we describe as *failure-to-launch*.

At every step the child should be allowed to meet the real experience of life; the thorn should never be plucked from the rose. Ellen Key

As a parent, what is my role in this epidemic? Am I doing for my son what he can, therefore should, be doing for himself? When I do it for him I'm sending the message that he can't do it, that I don't believe he has what it takes, that someone will always be there to clean up after him. Me doing something that is not mine to do, playing the roles of trouble-shooter, micromanager, detective, judge, au pair and warden, invariably injures *me* and keeps the two of us in a destructive cycle. Am I buffering John from either responsibility or pain? If so, then I'm not preparing him for a world with plenty of both. Am I working harder at his life than he is? If so, I'm preparing him to lower the bar, give up easily and live off others. Am I accepting unacceptable behavior? If so, I'm preparing him for relationships with the only people who will tolerate it. Allowing John's behavior to move me off my values and boundaries is *self-abusive* and trains him to disrespect me. It certainly served to nullify my official, signed, notarized and laminated contract. Every time I caved, Emerson's words taunted me; *what you do speaks so loudly he can't hear a word you say*. He needed me to be trustworthy, someone he could count on to keep her word about what would and would not be tolerated and what the consequences were. Kids need to be able to predict with 100% certainty what will happen if they break the rules. Contracts without consequences are merely hopes.

If we want our teenagers to grow in ways that will be deep, permanent and constructive then we need to understand this truth: *only up-close and personal experience with the full consequences of their own actions can do that*. They get effect after effect until finally they stop quitting on themselves and stop trying to use and blame others. Only when they're brought to their knees by their own consequences do they begin building their own authentic power. They learn the value and wisdom inherent in pain, the thorn and the rose. They are blocked from doing that unless we increase *our* tolerance for their pain and let them hurt without interference.

Natural consequences have proven time and again to be the best teachers – getting a poor grade if they choose not to do the work; losing our trust and feeling ashamed if they choose to lie, doing community service if they choose to deface an underpass with a lewd stick figure accompanied by block letters pronouncing THIS IS JOHN BLAIR'S TERRITORY. The next

best thing is a *logical* consequence – this is something bestowed on them by us but relates well to the offense. If their grades aren't good, they are given the gift of time to study (phone, internet, social life are extracted until grades go up). Arbitrary and unrelated consequences are largely ineffective in the long run although they can temporarily make parents feel like they have the upper hand. Consequences *always* need to be about teaching and nothing else.

Don't handicap your children by making their lives easy. Robert Heinlein

Nobody does natural consequences as well as a wilderness program and John got to go to one of the greats. He had to earn everything – a camping chair, a headlamp, utensils. If he wanted warm food, he made a fire with rocks and a stick. If he wanted cooperation, he had to give it first. Under duress at home, John tended to give up because there was always someone - me - to pick up the slack. That didn't work in the wilderness because it's a survival-of-the-fittest model that provides immediate feedback from both nature and his pack. Fit equals strong. Strong people seek solutions, weak people use and blame others. At home he was sleeping in 1500-thread-count sheets and a down mattress (in my defense they were on sale); in the wilderness even a straw pillow was hard-won. These programs are intentionally designed to break down defenses, give them a reality check and call forth the strength in them. Wilderness counselors rule by the law of Nietzsche by going to great lengths to make things harder for our teenagers, not easier - *what doesn't kill you makes you stronger*.

I am not the author, I am the pen. Rumi

I've understood for a very long time that the heart of any solution is about keeping my eyes on those things I can control. The Serenity Prayer has hung on my wall for over 30 years so it was unsettling to see how far away from it I'd moved. The wrecking ball that was John's drug use and the web of lies required to sustain it was daily pummeling my ability to position myself well. I was unaware that my focal point had somehow shifted from the *solution* and *me* to the *problem* and *John*. My language here is purposely not one of ownership because my experience was not one of free will. I found myself collapsing under the weight of both exhaustion and fear, much as I had collapsed years earlier under the weight of my own addiction. Exhaustion caused resentment and when I became the Resentful Injured Party the gloves were off and I would launch a power play. Before my eyes I could morph into a righteous, bossy eight-year-old intent on winning the tug-of-war even as the parent in me was acutely aware that the last person my son needed in the middle of his chaos was that little bitch. Fear didn't allow me to sit on my hands and let my son experience life on life's terms. Anything I did for John while feeling taken advantage of, drained, resentful or unappreciated was not done from a place of love but from a place of fear. And from that place, my field of vision, my mindfulness and my proximity to the Pause button were all profoundly inhibited. Fear-based decisions always perpetuate the problematic cycle.

The game-changer for me was personal pain. My pain threshold was the recognition that I was becoming a person that neither John nor I respected. I lost sight of what I stood for. I had stopped taking direction from my core. This is a holy place for me, one in which I know there is order within the chaos, that what's happening in the moment is but one page of our story. It's a place where god shows up in all the ways my heart recognizes him, just as I recognized myself in

the orangutan. When I'm feeling disconnected from my god and inner guidance, my values and my purpose, I forget that I am the *pen*. In 12-step language, this means letting go of my fear and my ideas of how things should be and aligning with a power greater than me, a power that is restorative; the *author*. While my language isn't up to the task of defining this, my experience is one of immediate and profound relief when I yield to, and depend on, what feels like a divine plan. Einstein found the words: *(My) religious feeling takes the form of a rapturous amazement at the harmony of natural law, which reveals an intelligence of such superiority that, compared with it, all the systematic thinking and acting of human beings is an utterly insignificant reflection.*

I'm working on a new, improved default position which begins with me leaning not *into* but *away from* the disturbance, where I have a clear view. From that quieter vantage point, it's usually easy to see what I should do. The Dalai Lama puts it like this: *the most important thing we can do when confronted with a problem is critical thinking followed by action.* When I'm quiet and breathing, it's easy to remember that I'm here to teach John, not to punish him. Every mess he ever made revealed something he had yet to learn – it's my job to examine the mess in order to see what that is and then facilitate the lesson. Not unlike the days of yore when I would examine his excretions to see what he swallowed. It was a simpler time. How I wish his Holiness had been there to co-parent with me (or Brad Pitt but for different reasons).

The Games People Play

Most parents who find their way to my office come late in the game when problems have escalated and the family is entrenched in a negative feedback loop. There are many reasons for this, all of them understandable, most of them because we're getting played by our kids. I recall cancelling just such a family the afternoon John called me complaining that he didn't feel well, "odd" was how he put it. I know now it was the effects of coming down off strong, hallucinogenic weed. I hurried home to make him tea and honey, put in a movie, icepack his forehead, rub his back. When he was feeling better, he drew himself a bath, donned his headphones and asked for my scented candles - what better way to relax and rejuvenate I said to myself and was feeling for all the world like a good mother while he proceeded to get high again in the next room.

Between these lapses of denial, I got lucky. I interrupted John's destructive cycle early and often and, thankfully, he never reached the point of complete noncompliance or refusal of help. He was "intervenable." This has much less to do with age than the *stage* your child is when you begin to intervene. In other words, the degree to which they're receptive is more about how long the problems have gone unaddressed than whether they're over 18 and legally responsible for themselves. Serious problems like drug and alcohol abuse are progressive by nature, increasingly depleting the parents *and* fortifying the resistance of the teenager. Many parents believe, or want to believe, that problematic patterns are self-limiting; that kids using drugs and drinking are being normal teenagers and will grow out of it. Those that do recognize the seriousness of the problem may continue to argue for what used to work, what worked for the other kids, even what is clearly not working now. Parenting is not one-size-fits-all. We must adapt our parenting strategies in accordance to what's going on; what works for mature, sober

kids will not work for emotionally arrested teens and/or those using any mind-altering, addictive substances.

Many parents get snared by what I call the burden-of-proof sleight of hand. This is where they postpone taking action until the presenting evidence passes muster with their teenager. If I had a dollar for every time I felt like a fool on the witness stand, cross-examined and discredited by a crack defense attorney with pithy catch phrases like “if the glove doesn’t fit you must acquit.” Parents: you do not need proof. The fact is, your intuition has been empirically shown to be more accurate than a urine test. The young people who try this in my office get the same thing John got: cut that crap out, this isn’t a court of law, this isn’t even punishment. It is good parenting.

Another tactic commonly used by the avoidant teenager is to obscure your vision with projection and deflection much like the octopus squirting ink at its predator, giving it time to escape. The pathology is projected onto the parent with “It’s not me, you’re just paranoid” and the like. Sadly for us, this can be quite effective. Many of my working hours are spent helping parents untangle their own words and value systems. “I can’t go back on what I promised,” is a common lament of parents because, of course, being true to your word is a sacred value in most families. When you go below the *letter* of the law to its *spirit*, however, you realize that it was never intended to mean that I should cement myself to an idea or a promise regardless of the circumstances. Consistent parenting doesn’t mean that I don’t get to change my mind if I have more truth today than I did yesterday. If I let you drive the car on Monday and I find the weed that you’re holding for a friend in your backpack on Tuesday, you don’t get to drive the car on Wednesday because neither the weed nor the flimsy excuse reflect the responsibility required of a driver of 2000 lbs of speeding metal. I won’t apologize for going back on a promise that was made without all the information. If I have to, I’ll quote Emerson again, *a foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds*. Raising kids means that we’re always faced with the moral dilemma of picking between two of our own values. Going back on my word is breaking one of my values, my child’s well-being and life is another value. I get to pick which one I’m going to stand on and the beauty of being an adult is I don’t have to defend it.

The kingpin of illusions and a game that parents play against themselves is that things are “good” when the family is in a phase of non-disturbance (in medicine, we call this an asymptomatic phase; in the addiction field, this is the calm in a calm-and-storm pattern). Notwithstanding my professional expertise in this area, my brain would deny reality in order to temporarily relieve me of my load. It didn’t matter that my denial was a fool’s paradise; my *physiology* was craving a time out, demanding that I compartmentalize while I recharged my battery. Teenagers using drugs or alcohol are on the Titanic. Where there’s a Titanic, there’s an iceberg, whether or not we can see it. We can’t change those facts or the bittersweet certainty that we get to see only the tip of this particular iceberg. We can only heed the instruments, exert all the influence we have toward changing its course, slow it down. We can only *prepare for what might happen* and *respond effectively to what has happened*. It’s said that it isn’t the size of the problem, it’s the number of people working on it that counts, so this is all-hands-on-deck time. Our job to get the lifeboat ready, practice some drills.

When you're in a Slump, you're not in for much fun. Unslumping yourself is not easily done. Dr. Seuss

I hope I've conveyed that when drugs and alcohol are present, the roadmap is necessarily different than when they're not. With this age group, the solution virtually always occurs in incremental steps and what sometimes feels like glacial speeds. It is a *process*, never an *event*. The road to sobriety and stability is like the road to Emerald City. It's bright yellow so you can't miss it. It's fraught with peril and discouragement, flying monkeys and a wicked witch of the west plotting your doom. There's also a witch from the south who's exceedingly sensitive to the plight of the enslaved and one from the north who plants a protective kiss on your forehead as you embark on your journey. You'll also need a scarecrow, a lion, a tin man and, of course, a good pair of shoes. You already possess everything you need but you won't find it unless you stay on the road.

The first step in getting help is getting a good assessment. That begins with CPR for the parents. Only once information and support breathe the life back into them are they in any position to help. Drug and alcohol problems are like cosmic black holes – their existence is inferred because of the signature effects and symptoms surrounding them, not because they are seen. Get an addiction expert. They know what to ask and how to spot the elusive symptoms that often disguise themselves as something else. They know when to call it a black hole. Young people (remember the survival brain) cannot discern where the line is between them controlling the drug and the drug controlling them. An addiction expert is also familiar with all the behind-the-scenes culprits that serve to sabotage the solution; i.e. any biopsychosocial and family components. A comprehensive assessment and treatment *must* be based on a family systems model because any solution is only as good as the environment that parents create. The best inpatient (away) treatment program is only as good as what your child comes home to. Parents have tremendous influence on the outcome. This is very good news for the parents who are willing to do the work.

The astrophysicists studying black holes are ahead of the addiction experts in being able to predict with stunning precision what's going to hit what and the moment it will happen. Nonetheless, we have studied hundreds of thousands of people of all ages over many years and they fall into very predictable patterns. Fortunately for us, this disorder follows a very predictable course and addressing it is all about timely course-corrections. We know that most people diagnosed with addictive disease die from it in some form; in teenagers, the form is typically accidental. But far more important to parents than any statistic is this: *Our most decisive scientific finding is that this is a very treatable problem and we know exactly what to do.* We just landed on Mars against insurmountable odds because a team of dedicated experts did not waver from their vision. Our children are much more valuable than the little celestial science lab called Curiosity. *Get and keep* a team of experts.

My clinical experience did not exempt me from this advice. In fact, it made me all the more aware that if I didn't get the guidance I needed, John was not about to get on board. I had vastly overestimated my ability to raise a young man alone because of my dedication to him and my success at raising such a fine boy. I did my best with the knowledge I had at the time. *When we know better, we do better*, Maya Angelou said. My impediment was that I didn't know what I

didn't know and that wasn't clear to me until it was too late. I need to forgive myself for that. I knew my way around chicken soup; I knew how to teach, care for and minister to. I remember giving John one of my best sermons a few years ago on the way to his football game where he was to sit on the bench because of his grades. He even complimented my talk as he walked away to face his coach who immediately whacked him on the chest with a gruff, "Get down to business, Blair." Watching his body straighten up, *rise up*, in response to that single moment was an emotional light bulb for me.

I also overestimated my ability to handle John's substance abuse problems because of my personal and professional expertise. When the unmanageability reached a threshold, I once again overestimated my ability to find the right place. After two bad-to-worse treatment experiences, I made my best decision in four years and hired an educational consultant whose business it is to know the track records and the inner workings of the programs. She matched my son with a program that turned out to be a veritable goldmine. *Note to self:* always hire educational consultants and party planners. Stick to star-gazing.

The Mother Ship was calling him home.

Larry and Ann Dixon are two of the finest people I know. The amalgam of their clinical expertise, their tremendous success at raising a sizable brood of their own, their passion and dedication to helping lost boys and their reverence for the great outdoors gave rise to New Beginnings at 7Ds Ranch. This is a small therapeutic working ranch in Utah where boys learn how to become strong, honourable men. The classroom is similar to my own – love, support, humour, homemade cinnamon buns. Also different precisely where John needs them to be right now; hands-to-earth work, being led by strong men, large family, small community, small school, simplicity. Challenges and lessons are embedded in putting their hands in the soil and even the cows when there's a calf that needs birthing. Working the ranch, mentoring and elevating new kids, living cooperation, work ethic and sobriety. A band of brothers; respected, accountable to each other, required to pull their own weight. Like all the boys, John is embraced as part of the Dixon team – the nuclear and extended family, the clinical staff, the ranch hands – whose mission is to help them find their strength, reach their goals, experience success. My mission was to recognize what John needed and then leave him there long enough for the miracle to take place.

When you have brought up kids, there are memories you store directly in your tear ducts. Robert Brault

Today is my 329th day of missing him. Someday I'll stop counting but I'm not ready yet. His teen years have deepened my understanding of what my parents went through with my addiction. Of the untold gifts my sobriety has given me over the years, by far the greatest is the ability to help my son with his. It started with his grandparents; they always were (always will be) my lighthouse.

It's said that the highest form of intelligence is to examine yourself without judging yourself. I've been pretty observant since my last scotch so I'm pretty adept at cutting myself slack but, still, the self-examined life is not for sissies. I'm sad and humbled by my mistakes, my

emotional cataracts, my weaknesses. On the other hand, I did keep on fighting the good fight. Next month, John will celebrate one year of sobriety; he's happy and thriving and he tells me everything in his life led him there so we should let go of our regrets. *The potential energy in the bow thrusting the arrow toward the target.*

A final, personal note to John. I'm so proud of you. You've been a worthy opponent, a consummate teacher and a son who's always been so easy to love. When you lose your footing, and you will many times, remember the one cardinal law central to the Blair Credo: all of Life's truths can be found in The Eagles songbook. This one's from me to you.

*It's your world now
Use well the time
Be part of something good
Leave something good behind
The curtain falls
I take my bow
That's how it's meant to be
It's your world now.*



Dr. Blair has a private practice in Scottsdale where she counsels and case manages individuals and families. She facilitates workshops for parents and groups for anyone seeking kickass recovery. In her spare time she works with stray dogs.