

# Into the Wild:

*Connecting with teens where they live*

By Andrew F. Robinson, M. Ed.

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## Introduction

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This is not a how-to book in the sense that it is not formulaic. Rather, it is a who-to book. I believe the requisite for creating positive change is our striving, no matter how imperfectly, to risk bringing our full, authentic selves to relationships—for we are the medium of our message. Who we are in our essence will speak to teens with a power which no technique or methodology or curriculum can rival.

Residing within each of us are resources that, when fully expressed, can make a world of difference in the life of a teen. The following three, in particular, are ones we must draw from as we seek to live out the principles touched upon in this short e-book:

- Courage to offer all you possess, no matter how much trepidation this may cause.
- Persistence in doing what it takes to serve teens.
- Patience to press on when we fall short of these ideals.

What follows are selections from my book, *[The Teen Age: 40 Reflections on Relating with Teens](#)*, that pertain directly to people in education. Whether you are a teacher, youth development educator, or other person who serves teens, I've structured this e-book in such a way that you may dive in anywhere and hopefully come up with a useful concept that provides fresh insight into the complex world of teens.

If you have questions along the way or stories you would like to share, I'd love to hear from you: [andrew@peoplechangepeople.com](mailto:andrew@peoplechangepeople.com).

## SARA

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Years ago I counseled a teen who I'll call Sara. She had been highly suicidal for some time and we had begun meeting after a failed attempt. It wasn't uncommon for Sara to prefer taking a walk during our time together. Many teens, I've noticed, are averse to eye contact. It's much easier for them to communicate on a walk than in an office. One day, as Sara and I began heading back to my office, an idea struck me. I asked her if she would be interested in a paper airplane contest. With obvious surprise mixed with interest, she agreed. We fashioned a couple of airplanes from newspaper and let the crafts set sail. Our two, awkward aeronautic interpretations soon made their way to the ground. Mine lay just a hair farther than hers. We laughed at the futility of the situation. The tone in the air was unmistakable. We were both struck by the joy that comes from doing something so spontaneous, pointless, and out of the ordinary.

The temptation for me to hold back from this frivolous suggestion was strong. Sara was, after all, considering suicide. Shouldn't I be more serious? We had already given plenty of time to serious dialogue. We had talked about her suicidal thoughts and intentions. She had spoken boldly about wanting to take her own life. But she came to me as a whole, complex person with many facets. Sara was more than a suicidal teen. She was a gem of a human being, but did not know it. There was no greater gift I could give, no greater compliment to her nature than to unfold my own self, hang from the clothesline my own uniqueness. Through being vulnerable and real, I gave her permission to experience both herself and the world more fully. We connected, and because of that connection I had a fighting chance of influencing her in a way that could save her life.

## BRAIN IN FULL BLOOM

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I recall talking with some parents about their fourteen-year-old son. They were sharing how Jason had always behaved well at home and at school. They had just spent time together as a family all weekend. Everything was wonderful until Monday when Jason skipped his morning classes and got caught vandalizing school property. How could that have happened?

I couldn't help thinking about some of the indefensibly foolish decisions I made as a teenager. My friends made equally foolish ones. It was as if we all had a meeting and decided together to do really thoughtless things with no apparent awareness of the consequences.

What was something you did during your teen years that was completely thoughtless? This question isn't meant to cast you back into the angst of adolescence, but rather to help you become an effective observer of decisions you made during that time in your own development. As you and I become active and compassionate observers of our own adolescence we can better appreciate the teens we work with and their seemingly inexplicable actions.

Thanks to modern technology, scientific explanations now exist for the illogical, reactionary nature of adolescents. Through ground breaking brain-based research, scientists have discovered significant changes within the human brain that take place during the teen years. (*The Primal Teen*, by Barbara Strauch, is an excellent book on adolescent brain development.) Some of the recent findings reveal:

- Between the ages of twelve and twenty five the brain is a work in progress with millions of connections being formed and millions being dissolved.
- Neurochemicals wash over the teen brain, reorganizing its previous capacity and capabilities.
- The teen brain undergoes a blooming process in which the brain over-produces brain cells. This process was previously thought to be finished in children around the time of kindergarten.

- Overproduction allows for pruning, a critical process whereby the brain creates pathways according to the use-it-or-lose-it principle: it keeps connections we use and loses those we don't.
- This growth, or construction, takes place in critical portions of the adolescent brain that influence behavior.

Appreciating these findings is central to our effectiveness in working with teens.

## **TEEN COMPASS**

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How can we change teen behavior? The prevailing answer to this question is, "Knowledge!" If teens know more, or so goes the assumption, they will make better choices. Right?

Does a teen know that if he gets into the car with someone who's been drinking, he may be at risk of dying? Yes. Does a teen know that having sex might create a baby? Yes. Does a teen know that if she comes home after her curfew she won't be able to drive for a week? Yes. Does it really make a difference whether a teen knows something? Does knowing something change teen behavior? No. Because the difference between a good decision and a bad one is not a lack of knowledge. It's something else.

The developmental process underway between the ears of every teen compromises their ability to assimilate information. In our passion to help, we tend to dump voluminous amounts of information on them. This encourages teens to disengage from the learning process and from us.

Adolescent brain research reveals that teens' brains are engaged in a remodeling process akin to converting a two lane highway into four. The four lane highway works better, but during the construction process no one likes sitting in the stop and go traffic. The teen brain works, but not as well as an adult's. This explains, for example, the ubiquitous phenomenon of teens struggling to assimilate information.

Rather than making decisions based on logical, rational thought processes, they tend to be impulsive. Their decisions are often thoughtless and void of any consideration for future repercussions. This does not mean teens can't assimilate information. They can. They just don't translate information into action very well. We can all imagine a teen testing perfectly on the risks of alcohol use, then cutting out of school to get drunk.

It's not uncommon for me to hear well-meaning educators and youth workers say, "My job is to just give teens the best information possible. It's up to them to make their own decisions." In light of adolescent brain development findings, could any notion be more absurd? Information didn't impact my adolescent years in any meaningful way. Did the best information possible rock your world? I doubt it.

This prevailing assumption that well-presented information will lead to changed behavior is rooted in a deeper assumption that teens arrive at decisions by means of a logical, sequential thought process. In fact, teens participate in this process very little and make decisions at an entirely different level. This level is subconscious, rather than conscious and logical.

As a different perspective on teen decision-making consider how a compass works. I arrived at this understanding after exploring a wilderness area in Oregon with a few friends. To navigate the reaches of this wilderness area we used a map and a compass. We found a landmark on a map, a meadow or spring, for example, and used the compass to get us there. I was struck by what faith we put in the compass to get us where we wanted to go and how, even if I thought we should go a different direction, the compass never failed to guide us to our landmark. On several occasions we became disoriented and thought the compass was misleading us. We wisely subjected what seemed right to us to the authority of the compass and didn't once get lost. Then it struck me that this is a perfect analogy for how teens make decisions. They don't appeal to logic and reason. They defer to a deeper, less conscious decision-making process. This explains why, "I dunno," is the most common response teens give when we ask why they made what we would consider a bad decision.

Returning from this trip I began to think differently about how teens make decisions. I conceptualized a model, The Teen Compass, that addresses the complexity of how teens make decisions. According to this model teens' decisions arise from a set of variables that collectively influence the direction the compass needle is pointing. A teen whose compass needle is pointing at or near North is a teen who over the course of time makes relatively healthy decisions, though it is feasible that he will make the occasional unhealthy one. For example, it isn't uncommon to hear about the straight-A-student who gets caught shoplifting. However, a teen whose needle is constantly pointing South makes unhealthy decisions on a consistent basis. Yet neither of these teens has a rational explanation for their own decisions. They both deferred to the needle's direction. Our task is to strengthen the resolve of the teens who make healthy decisions while helping move northward the compass needle of teens who don't make healthy choices with any regular consistency.

A set of variables help determine the needle's direction. Though there are likely far more variables at play in the adolescent decision-making process, I consider the following among the most influential:

Self Perception—How accurately does a teen perceive herself and to what degree is the teen content with her perceptions?

Morals/Beliefs—To what degree is a teen committed to a sense of good and bad, right and wrong?

World Perception—How does the teen view the world outside, and her perceived role within it?

Future Orientation—How well has the teen defined his future, and how motivated is he now to make the necessary sacrifice to achieve his goals?

Outcome Expectations—How well can the teen identify the correlation between actions and possible outcomes that will likely follow?

Self-Efficacy—Does a teen believe he can accomplish that to which he commits himself?

This decision-making process is below the level of conscious thought. The factors influencing the needle's direction relate to one another like a committee; the direction of the needle is the expression of a dynamic that exists among the variables. This process is hidden. All we see is the outcome in the form of an action. To the degree that we can be a part of the committee's conversation is the degree to which we can be part of shaping the decision.

In order to affect the variables and influence the needle's direction you and I must access the compass. We access the compass by cultivating a trusted relationship with teens.

Building meaningful relationships requires two components: time and trust. More time will furnish more opportunities for teens to trust us. As they build trust we will strengthen our influence. But with the benefit of time we can influence the variables that will move their compass needle in a positive direction.

## THEY'VE GOT A NAME FOR PEOPLE LIKE YOU

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The following exchange—taken from the 1987 film *Raising Arizona*—between prison inmate Hi (played by Nicolas Cage) and his parole board is a perfect illustration of our tendency to put people into categories based on our perceptions:

*Parole board chairman: They've got a name for people like you, Hi. That name is called "recidivism." Repeat offender! Not a pretty name, is it, Hi?*

*Hi: No, sir. That's one bonehead name, but that ain't me anymore.*

*Parole board chairman: You're not just telling us what we want to hear?*

*Hi: No, sir, no way.*

*Parole board member: 'Cause we just want to hear the truth.*

*Hi: Well, then I guess I am telling you what you want to hear.*

*Parole board chairman: Boy, didn't we just tell you not to do that?*

*Hi: Yes, sir.*

*Parole board chairman: Okay, then.*

Like so much in life, this scene is funny because it reflects something true about human nature. The parole board is dubious of Hi's claims to reform. They don't see him as someone capable of making anything other than bonehead choices.

Likewise, our perceptions of teens inform our expectations of their behavior and abilities. You have probably read studies in which school administrators tell teachers their classes comprise either high- or low-achieving students. The teachers believe this assessment and set expectations commensurate with their perception of student capabilities. Though the classes were actually homogenous in terms of previous performance, the perceived high-achieving students outperform the perceived low achievers.

We are all prone to categorizing others. This person is stingy. That person is particular. In many respects we can't help this, nor is there anything necessarily wrong with forming perceptions. But we can enhance our relationships with youth by making these perceptions pliable. Doing so extends to them an opportunity to teach us

about who they really are. When we become students of teens we allow them to clarify our perceptions. Our relationships are then more authentic because they are rooted in a more accurate understanding.

I find the following thought experiment to be helpful. Think of one teen in your life, then:

- 1) Imagine this youth looking you in the eye and saying, “How do you see me?”
- 2) Formulate an honest response. Go ahead and generalize like crazy. Wrap the individual up in a box and assume for a moment this is accurate. Give your brain permission to think you’ve got this adolescent figured out. What you are doing is creating an accurate assessment of your existing perception and then making this perception conscious and conspicuous.
- 3) Now brainstorm some alternate perceptions. To do this you have to swivel around the youth to gain unique vantage points. In what settings might the teen do something that would broaden your existing perception? Picture the individual at home, in a museum, in a garden, with a pet, on a plane. How might seeing the youth in these various settings help fill out your perceptions?
- 4) In the next week note the exceptions to your previous perceptions. You will have to look hard and not be derailed by the experiences that reinforce your original over-generalized perception. Fighting this tendency is your task. This can only enhance how you relate to, and enjoy, this individual.

Fresh aspects of a teen’s character and personality broaden and correct our previous perceptions, thus becoming more real to us. We can then relate in a way that is more authentic and enlivening.

Look for teens to surprise you. Expect teens to surprise you. Extend to them the invitation to teach you truths about their character and personality. Grant them the freedom to not only correct existing misperceptions, but also add new dimensions to your understanding.

## **JOIN THE RESISTANCE**

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Most teens are card-carrying members of the opposition party. This is good. Opposition is an opportunity. It communicates something. Your task is to understand what teens are trying to communicate. This, of course, requires listening.

An oppositional teen is doing you a favor. He's providing feedback. You may not know what's amiss, but that you know something is amiss is better than nothing. So he's communicating, albeit in a way that can range anywhere from disrespectful to unpalatable, and now you have the opportunity to do something crazy: Join him. Hidden behind the oppositional behavior is information and insight we needed to know. Trust that this information is there and that it is a kernel of truth that's not only valid, it's brilliant. You have to trust and believe it's there and know that the only way you will ever begin to understand it is if you join him. Study him. Know how he feels, that he feels, how he sees things, what it might be like to look out of his eyes, no matter how bizarre his accusations and rants may be. Do this and you enter the realm of miracle worker.

Our natural, immediate reflex when teens resist us is to clamp down. We do this to regain a sense of control. In the process we alienate teens. Let's look at oppositional behavior in a different light.

Opposition is a key tool for a teen. She uses it to figure out what's true and who she can trust. She's like a cowboy who fires down a canyon. She hears the bullet ricochet and waits to see if anyone returns fire. If it's quiet she'll enter. The sure-fire way to send a teen running for the hills is to return opposition with opposition.

I once taught as a guest speaker in a class that spoke almost no English. Students were either Mexican or Russian immigrants. I simplified each lesson and worked hard to track with students who might be struggling to keep up. In the mix was a disruptive student. I let his disruptions slide for a while to see how committed he was. It turns out he was very committed. I had very few options and his behavior was beginning to influence other students. I was out on a wire.

To keep the class from spiraling out of control I had to address this student's challenges. I did what seemed most appropriate in the moment: I sang. Approaching the student and looking him in the eye I began to sing, "How bad do you want to move?" Don't look for this song on iTunes. I made it up. The student stared at me and, after a brief look of disbelief, he began to smile. All of his antics were an attempt to communicate. He wanted to know if I would listen. Somehow my bizarre response let him know I saw him, respected him, and joined him. He expected me to resist him.

Joining an oppositional teen is something everyone can do. It takes courage, creativity, and humility. Our options are clear: Either we listen to what teens are communicating through oppositional behavior, and join them—or we don't listen, essentially abandoning them through our alienation and lack of interest.

I used to do a thought experiment with couples in marriage counseling in which I asked each person to imagine his or her spouse truly believed they were a storybook character like Little Bo Peep or Robin Hood. The idea behind this experiment is to cultivate in each spouse curiosity about the other's experience. It sets in motion a relational dynamic in which one partner is curious instead of condemning about his or her spouse. I challenged them to wonder how they would relate to their spouse. The options are few. They can either try to talk their spouse out

of their delusion and guarantee resistance and conflict. Or they can ask their spouse to describe what it is like to be Robin Hood, for example.

This concept is illustrated well in *A Beautiful Mind*, a film about John Nash, a brilliant schizophrenic mathematician played by Russel Crowe. His delusions are vivid and involve people and scenarios that are the creation of Nash's troubled mind. These delusions destroy his relationships leaving him isolated and terrified. The turning point in the film is when Nash's friends and family begin to acknowledge his delusions and stop trying to persuade him that his perceptions are not grounded in reality. They attempt, for example, to see and know about the people Nash claims to see. This is a heroic act of compassion. Unlike Nash, they don't believe the people are actually there. They are not colluding with Nash's delusions. They realize that for Nash the delusions are real and that caring about him means being with him in his delusion rather than withdrawing from him. It is through this act of acknowledging his perspective, skewed though it is, that the delusions subside. In the film he says goodbye to the characters he created. It is as though the real, substantial relationships in his life displaced the delusions, but only because these people were courageous enough to try to see life through Nash's eyes.

We have the same choice when relating with teens. We can try to convince them of their delusions and experience the conflict that ensues, or we can try to understand their perspective, no matter how obscure. One approach creates distance, the other creates the opportunity for connection. One comes naturally. The other requires effort. These are the moments in which we have to make difficult decisions that will shape the nature of our relationships with teens.

## **LET THE RIVER TAKE YOU**

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I once saw a man nearly drown. And there wasn't a thing I could do about it. I was standing high above the Deschutes River in Central Oregon watching boaters go through a large rapid. A man fell off his raft and struggled

against the river's pull. His head sat atop the waves. He was yelling for help, but no one could reach the small eddy that gripped him. Fortunately the current soon yielded and he floated down river where another boat pulled him to safety.

Years later, while rafting Oregon's Rogue River, I watched two men attempt to run a class V rapid. Both fell overboard and vanished for close to a minute. They eventually made their way to their raft and back to shore where we rejoined them. Both men were nonchalant about the incident. "I just let it take me," said Rick, one of the two men who went over the falls. "I folded my arms and looked up at the blue sky. What else could I do?"

Rick is a seasoned rafter. He knew better than to fight against the river. Only with experience and time could he learn to resist the natural reflex to fight the pull of the river and trust that the river wouldn't hold him forever. The best thing he could do to survive was to join, rather than resist the river. Otherwise he would expend valuable energy and oxygen needed to live.

We have the same choice in relationships in which we experience resistance. Teens resist most people. Our reflex when we sense resistance is to countervail. But in so doing we multiply the tension. Resistance makes us feel out of control. Fighting a teen's resistance helps us feel in control. But in struggling against the current we lose valuable energy and focus and risk doing damage to a potentially transformative relationship.

So what are we to do? Join the resistance. This does not mean that we condone the resistance any more than a rafter tries to stay underwater. But if your relationship is to survive and thrive, joining is essential. This involves striving to see as youth see, so we can understand their perspective and better know their experience. Joining is twice beneficial:

1. Joining is an opportunity to better understand another. If you provide the opportunity, most adolescents will help you better understand their perceptions.

2. Joining provides teens with an opportunity to see with greater clarity and accuracy. Given the opportunity to explain their perceptions, it is natural for teens to change their minds.

## CHLOE

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It was my fifth and last day with upperclassmen at a local high school. I was halfway through the class period when it happened. We were discussing sexual decisions, in particular the pros and cons of having sex at an early age versus the pros and cons of waiting.

The door opened and a girl entered who had not been present for any of the other four discussions. Her appearance reminded me of that of a teen pop star. She sauntered past me with an air of confidence and eased into her chair.

A few moments later I posed the question to the class, “What are some reasons teens choose to have sex?” Without hesitation the late girl raised her hand.

“Because it’s natural,” she said. I asked her for her name. She shot back, “Chloe.” Her tone was unmistakable. She wanted a skirmish. I recognized this and responded with a good deal of enthusiasm, “You’re absolutely right! Sex is as natural as breathing.” I went on to amplify the truth embedded in her statement: Sex is natural. I could see she wasn’t expecting this, but a fight instead. I think part of her hoped I would launch into a monologue about the risks of sex at an early age. Stunned a bit, she sat quietly in her chair.

I then proceeded to ask questions and facilitate dialogue as we discussed together the reasons teens choose sexual activity, and potential drawbacks to such decisions. Part way through I switched gears, “We’ve discussed the reasons why some teens have sex and some of the potential drawbacks to that decision. But why would someone choose to wait for sex?”

Chloe raised her hand. I would be lying if I said I wasn't hesitant to call on her.

But in the place of the venom that had laced her previous statements there was now stone-cold sobriety. "I think I would have more respect for myself," she said. That was it. The room was quiet. I was stunned. A good number of her classmates appeared to be as well.

By honoring her initial statement, oppositional though it was, we didn't get bogged down in resistance. Instead of remaining stuck, this freed her to consider a different perspective.

I've heard stories about hunters discovering the carcasses of two deer whose antlers are locked together. Unable to separate themselves, they died a tragic, prolonged death. You and I do well not to lock antlers with teens.

Teens need to process their ideas. They need us to listen without reacting. Whenever possible, find the truth in a teen's statement that you can support. You don't have to agree with him or her in entirety. But if you can affirm at least in part, you keep the conversation alive, making possible a deeper connection. In time we may earn the right to share our thoughts and opinions. And teens might even listen to what we have to say.

## **CAMERON**

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We can't keep ourselves from communicating. We do it all the time. Whether we're standing in an airport, driving our car, or sitting with another person in silence, we are still communicating. Listening to teens in the manifold ways they communicate can be an enormous challenge. They might say two completely contrary statements in the span of one conversation. They are overjoyed one minute and in tears the next. Listening to them can be like trying to pick out a song that is barely eking through radio static. Clarity comes and goes and may not reappear

for some time. But if we wait long enough, and with intention, we will typically gather a better sense of what teens are truly saying.

I once met with a teen in my counseling practice in the middle of his parents' divorce. He was the oldest of four and had the responsibility of taking care of his siblings while his parents fought like children. In the middle of the divorce proceedings, while his parents hurled all sorts of abuses at one another, I met with Cameron in my office. It was clear from the beginning that he was exhausted and despondent. His parents were tearing the family apart, and he was in the middle of it.

Cameron plopped down in my office and we talked for a while. His words became quieter, with little life or purpose in them. I watched him deflate. I thought to myself, "This is the one hour he gets to rest, to be away from the hell that surrounds him the rest of the week."

I stopped talking, not wanting to require a thing from this boy who had nothing to give. Cameron stopped talking too. He looked off toward the window and fell asleep. For forty minutes I sat in silence grieving for this child in front of me.

This is a time I can look on and say I felt I was truly listening. He was communicating to me, "I just need to rest." I listened and provided a place for him to do so. I didn't ask anything of him that he could not give. I didn't try to change or control the conversation. I entered his world, felt his pain, fathomed as best I could where he was at in that very moment, and responded accordingly. This is the essence of listening.

Cameron was telling me in the only way he knew how that he was exhausted. He was in more pain than he could comprehend, let alone articulate. He just needed rest from the fury that surrounded him. He slept curled up on a sofa in my office until our session was over. Then, quietly, I began saying his name. After some coaxing, his eyes opened. Cameron looked confused as he sat up and surveyed the room. He grabbed his sweater and looked at me. "Thank you," was all he said, and then he left my office.

There are some principles here that apply to most relationships we have with teens:

1) Let them lead.

Cameron was my guide. My job was merely to follow him. He set the tone for our relationship. I matched the tone. I required nothing of him. What makes this so difficult is that we want to be comfortable. When we ask teens to follow us and do things the way we do, then we feel more comfortable and life is more predictable. Relationships with teens in which they are the guide is not merely a journey, it is an adventure and, as such, is completely unpredictable.

This is not to say we don't set boundaries. We do. It's like teaching a teen to drive. We explain the guidelines to him. If he violates any of the boundaries he won't be driving for a while, but if he stays within them he can choose where to go.

2) Study teens.

I had to give Cameron my undivided attention. This meant I had to constantly fight off distractions that ran through my own mind. If my distracting thoughts had their way I could miss a clue that could help me meet Cameron where he was living and suffering.

## **WHO CHANGED YOU?**

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Susan was a junior at Knoxville High School. She was obese. She abused a variety of drugs. Her grades were terrible. She didn't take good care of herself. One day the basketball coach invited her to film each of the varsity team's games. Susan accepted his invitation. That season, whether they were playing at home or traveling to other schools, Susan was part of the team. The coach soon noticed a transformation in her character

and behavior. She lost weight, raised her grade point average, started taking care of her physical appearance, and stopped using drugs.

While I can't know all the factors playing into Susan's transformation, I suspect what did not change her were the usual methods we're inclined to employ to improve adolescent health: curricula, demonstrations, lectures, interventions and such. The coach handed Susan so much more than a camera, and so much less than a battery of prevention methods. He saw, appreciated, honored, and trusted her.

Why do relationships change us? How do relationships change us? Imagine a person you know well, a spouse, a friend, a neighbor. We can't prevent ourselves from being impacted by this person any more than we can keep from making our own impact on him or her. It's the nature of human interactions. We are changed and go about changing others through connections we form with the people in our lives.

I encourage you to ask yourself this question: Who made the greatest positive difference in your life as an adolescent? You may remember a coach who believed in you, a parent who remained by your side through your highs and lows, or a teacher who inspired you to be more than you thought possible. Who was this person? What about her changed your life? What would you say to this person now? If you could thank her, what would you thank her for?

You may be someone, and you aren't alone, who didn't have anyone there to support you during this critical time in your life. You may have always craved the consistent presence of a compassionate adult who was there to cheer you on. Describe that person. How would you want that person to support and encourage you? What things would he have done to impress upon you his firm belief in you? Write these things down in detail.

This exercise leads us to a second question: How can you be this person you just described to the teens in your life? I will venture a guess that the person or people who influenced you did not do so by virtue of what they said. Sure, you may recall some profound comments. But what made the words profound was the character of the person who

said them and the nature of your relationship. It was the trusted connection between you is what unalterably affected you for life.

## **“When I Was Your Age...”**

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*I'll tell you all my secrets, but I'll lie about my past.*

*—Tom Waits, Tango Till They're Sore*

A question many of us struggle to answer is, “How much of my past should I share?” I have interviewed teens about this question and found their feedback insightful. First, they would like adults to share more about their lives. The fact that they actually want to know more about the lives of their parents, teachers, and other adults surprised me. According to the teens I spoke with, adults are not transparent enough. They said that this lack of disclosure created distrust and disconnect with adults. This means that adults who choose to share a simple, timely story can strengthen their connection with teens.

The second theme that has surfaced in my interviews with teens is that while most adults err on sharing too little, some adults share too much and in a way that is overwhelming. “It was too intense,” said one student in a focus group who had listened to a guest speaker who had contracted HIV as a teen. During her time with the class she shared openly about her promiscuity. “It freaked me out when she kept crying,” said another student in the focus group. As powerful as her story was, the presenter delivered her story with such detail and emotion that the students disengaged. What could have been a useful illustration to spark discussion was rendered irrelevant by its intensity.

Connection results when we are able to strike the balance between these two extremes. Pay attention to how we do this naturally with friends and peers. We tend to share personal stories with friends in a natural, seamless way. Something a friend says reminds me of an experience I had. Several factors come into play that determine whether I share a story or not. How well do I know this person? We're more inclined to disclose personal stories to those we know and trust. Will sharing my story detract from or contribute to the conversation? Does the setting lend itself to me sharing this story? If my friend is holding his baby who is crying I should probably table my appendicitis story for a later date. Most people consider these kinds of variables, if not consciously, then at a subconscious level. Good conversations are a natural give and take of personal, but appropriate self-disclosure.

Stories will come to mind through the same organic process when we're engaged in our conversations with teens. If you are ever unsure whether you should disclose a personal story with teens, consider the following guidelines. I have used these in my work with educators to help them work toward constructive self-disclosure:

First, is it relevant? Your story should be consistent with the context and content that surround the conversation.

Second, is it appropriate? Your story should match the development of your audience.

Last, are they curious? Our stories will be helpful to teens if they are interested in our story and want us to share. Teens want us to share our stories with them, so long as the stories meet this criteria.

Adults that connect with teens have a patina—they show the marks of time and experience. Sharing about our past in constructive ways will increase our ability to connect with teens. Share too much or inappropriately and we will repel them like the guest speaker did. But to relate with teens as though we don't have a past is nothing short of a disservice.

## THE HOW IN LIFE

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In my work with teens, I find it eminently helpful to take to heart the concept I learned years ago in Communication 101: Communication comprises two elements, What and How. What is the hard data. It is black ink on white paper. How is the way we communicate the data. It is our body language, tone, inflection, silence, and other nonverbal elements that shape meaning. By most expert accounts, How is eighty-five to ninety-five percent responsible for the meaning of our communication and the remainder of the meaning derives from what we say.

For instance, how many different ways can we ask: “Where’s the gallon of milk I bought?” I can pose this question in a way that exhibits nonchalance, impatience, or anger. And by simply shifting the emphasis of the words I can infuse the question with different, even conflicting meanings.

Just as in communication, the How in life is more important than the What. Consider, for example, that people don’t travel to see a world famous surgeon because she has the best scalpel. They go to her because of who she is and how she uses her scalpel. The same is true for us. Who we are, how we comport, how we relate with teens—these factors determine the effectiveness of what we say and do.

Let’s look now at our relationships with teens and notice where we tend to place the greatest emphasis. Without reservation I maintain we’ve flipped that ninety/ten ratio: We focus ninety percent of our attention and energy (and budgets) on what to say to teens. This is no more obvious than within the educational system. Here we talk about “getting through the curriculum,” and “equipping teens with good information” and “covering a lot of ground.” We often hear about how teens need “access to information.” Are you kidding me? There’s a library full of information in most cities. I was at ours the other day and didn’t see anyone guarding the entrance to prevent teens from entry. There’s an Internet that’s all too ready to deliver information to teens, accurate or otherwise. Is something preventing teens from accessing information that I don’t know about?

I am at a loss to name one curriculum or piece of data that awakened me as a teen to new understanding, optimism, and resolve. I suspect this to be true for you too. Curricula and data alone did not change us and they will not positively change the teens we work with. Most of us know this tacitly, but it appears to me that we've all but forgotten about this reality in our interactions with teens.

In our efforts to enhance teen well-being we can feel significant pressure to say and do the right thing. But connecting ought to be our real goal. When we remember that what we say is not nearly as important as how we relate with them, we can relax a bit. It isn't that saying the right thing isn't important. But saying the right thing will more likely resonate when we do it in the context of relationship. This is the shift that must take place for us to avail ourselves to teens in ways that can change their lives forever.

## INTO THE WILD

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*But this Wrangell camp-fire, my first in Alaska, I shall always remember for its triumphant storm-defying grandeur, and the wondrous beauty of the psalm-singing, lichen-painted trees which it brought to light.*

*—John Muir, Travels in Alaska*

John Muir, the famous naturalist, writer, and founder of the Sierra Club, journeyed to Alaska in 1879 for the first time. Late one night in Wrangell, Alaska he ventured out into a storm to build a fire, “to see how the Alaska trees behave in storms and hear the songs they sing.”

Muir took only a box of matches and a candle. After a long, patient search he found a small dry piece of tinder. He collected twigs and bark which he dried and used to build a conical hut. With his body he shielded the hut from

the driving rain. He lit his candle, placed it into the hut to catch fire, and began to feed the fire with wood shavings. The fire grew and threw more light on the forest floor. Muir could now see larger dead branches and pieces of bark to feed to the flame. He added more wood until the fire had “a strong hot heart and sent up a pillar of flame thirty or forty feet high, illuminating a wide circle in spite of the rain.”

Teens are like a vast wilderness. Be like Muir next time you venture in; don't take so much with you. A small fire will in time grow. Everything you need to grow the fire is around you, within you, and in the hearts and minds of teens.

## **GOOD QUESTIONS**

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Each year our family spends an extended period of time in Tucson, Arizona. One of our favorite activities each Sunday is to go to a local farmer's market. In a plaza near the market stands a bronze statue of St. Philip. During one of our visits my daughter and I noticed in his folded hands a stack of quarters. We both began to consider: Where did the quarters come from? Why were they in St. Philip's hands, and not in the fountain at the feet of the statue? If this was an offering, then why only quarters? Why had no one taken them?

Without realizing it at the time, together we were practicing the art of divergent thinking. Divergent thinking describes our ability, or lack of ability, to consider multiple solutions to a problem. For instance, your ability to think divergently would be tested if you locked your keys in the car in a remote location. In this situation you would need to explore multiple options for opening your car. Another experiment to encourage divergent thinking may be to see how many unique uses you can devise for a paper clip.

Convergent thinking is concerned only with one answer. There is no entertaining multiple options with convergent thinking. Many educational approaches with youth today promote convergent thinking. Concerned only with

helping students mark test questions with a single right answer, our educational approaches leave little room for divergent thinking. Convergent methods force youth toward predetermined answers, instead of letting them examine multiple possibilities to arrive at answers that mean something for them. I believe we can greatly improve our efficacy by utilizing divergent learning methods that encourage teens to consider multiple options before arriving at an answer.

Possibilities may emerge that are in direct contrast to previously held assumptions and perceptions. When teens adopt a new idea and shift their perceptions we say they've learned something. In order for this to happen we need to be skilled in asking questions that encourage a divergent encounter. Divergent thinking will solidify resolve, not soften it.

For instance, if we want teens to avoid using alcohol, we could offer a clear message that might include, but not be limited to the following: The use of alcohol at an early age can damage your life, your relationships, and your future. This a true, accurate statement we shouldn't compromise. But how can we encourage students to take this message seriously? A common response to this challenge is to substantiate our message with data and demonstrations. What ensues is something like a court case in which we present loads of indisputable evidence to verify our message. We believe that making a solid, reasonable, data-backed case will compel teens to make better choices. This doesn't work with adults (many adult smokers are familiar with the risks of smoking) and it doesn't work well with teens. What's missing is the opportunity for teens to explore this message by asking questions to test its validity and relevance to their lives. Divergent thinking is indispensable to this process. Many teens have to relearn how to be divergent thinkers. They also need time to trust you honestly want to hear their questions and know what they think.

George Land and Beth Jarman, in their book *Breakpoint and Beyond*, mention a longitudinal study that surveyed sixteen hundred three-to-five-year-old children in the early days of the national Head Start program. Researchers used eight different tests to gauge the levels of divergent thinking. Ninety-eight percent of the children surveyed scored genius level. Five years later they tested the same children and found the proportion of students considered genius dropped to thirty-two percent. When tested five years later, the proportion dropped to ten percent.

It's notable that a mere two percent of two hundred thousand adults that have taken the test score genius level. Should we wonder then, given that ninety-eight percent of us adults do not excel at divergent thinking, that we struggle to encourage it in teens?

In *Teaching as a Subversive Activity* Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner posit an unconventional and interesting curriculum concept for schools. It's composed of two parts: the art and science of asking questions, and asking questions generated by students.

They suggest the following as a standard to apply to determine if a question is good:

- 1) *Will your questions increase the learner's will as well as his capacity to learn?*
- 2) *Will they help to give the student a sense of joy in learning?*
- 3) *Will they help to provide the learner with confidence in one's ability to learn?*
- 4) *In order to get answers, will the learner be required to make inquiries? (Ask further questions, clarify terms, make observations, classify data, etc.?)*
- 5) *Does each question allow for alternative answers (implying alternative modes of inquiry)?*
- 6) *Will the process of answering the questions tend to stress the uniqueness of the individual?*
- 7) *Would the questions produce different answers if asked at different stages of the learner's development?*
- 8) *Will the answers help the learner to sense and understand the universals in the human condition and so enhance the ability to draw closer to other people?*

Not all of these standards may apply to your relationship with every teen in every situation. Their richness is that they encourage us and the teens we serve to think divergently. Such questions help teens consider multiple options and ideas. Only after we've pursued divergent questions should we utilize convergence to arrive at an answer. At that point youth begin to narrow the options to those that best answer the questions. The process that precipitates these answers is far more valuable and useful than simply knowing the right answers.

## **BLESSED ARE THE RABBIT TRAILS**

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In order to make sense of anything we have to connect what we know with what we don't. Making this connection isn't a clean, clear process. We often wander and so do teens.

Teens are prone to depart from what we consider the main topic; they make rabbit trails. How do we adults usually respond? We try to make teens stay on track or bring them back to our understanding of a topic and our agenda.

What would happen if we allowed, even encouraged, teens to explore these rabbit trails? We often avoid or discourage pursuing rabbit trails because we don't find them helpful or an efficient use of time. But who is the rabbit trail not helping? It may not help us, but it may be essential for a teen. Constructive wandering is integral to learning for teens. Create clear boundaries. Define the main trail with clarity. This will give teens a place to return. They can then bring back to the main topic what they gathered by wandering through rabbit trails. The smaller trails weave into the larger trails, broadening their understanding of a topic and giving it more meaning.

It is common for teens to ask a question or make a comment that is off topic. He may challenge what you say or make a comment that seems obtuse. Here's your opportunity to give a gift that could change this teen's life.

Stop and ask the teen to say more. Something is happening within that teen. Water may have finally reached a little seed with the message, “Hey little buddy. It’s time to wake up.” Life is in the works and you get to be a part of it. So resist the urge to stunt the seed’s growth by covering it with a piece of plywood. Give it light, warmth and more water. Let it grow.

Teens watch our moves. They have a deep sense that, “I know you’re saying this is how things are, but in order to understand what you mean I must explore certain questions whose end may or may not be yours.” To effectively teach and mentor teens we need to permit, even encourage divergence—a central element to being human.

## **MY FAVORITE DIVERGENTS**

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Every human is peculiar. I believe it is foundational to real education that we encourage youth to recognize and exercise their peculiarity. But peculiarity is something we tend to buff out and knock the edges from to prevent teens from breaking the mold we’ve created. Divergence is instrumental to learning. But too often we seek to get rid of divergence at its first stirring, shunning it as a body might reject a transplanted organ.

Throughout history divergent souls have been met with scorn and rejection. The composer Igor Stravinsky was one such Divergent. When he debuted *The Rite of Spring* a riot ensued. People attending the premiere expected to hear music that was familiar and comfortable. Stravinsky delivered something of another sort. The audience took offense and began to boo, scream, yell, and fight with one another. Police arrived and were unable to subdue the crowd. Stravinsky was rumored to have escaped through a bathroom window.

The source of the conflict was not Stravinsky. The riot was fueled by the audience members’ internal expectations and assumptions. Interestingly, critics and audience members lauded subsequent performances. There were no additional

riots. Why? Because the audience had changed. Once the audience members adjusted their expectations they could appreciate and enjoy what Stravinsky was doing. It all made sense. People recognized Stravinsky's brilliance.

The adolescent world is full of Divergents. Teens, like Stravinsky, want to explore, understand, and articulate their perceptions. Stravinsky was inspired by West African rhythms, which he incorporated into *The Rite of Spring*. Imagine if Stravinsky had cowered in fear at the outrage shown toward his masterpiece. Imagine if he had never written *The Rite of Spring* for fear it wasn't what the world wanted. I can't fathom life without those Divergents I admire: Jesus of Nazareth, Søren Kierkegaard, Bob Dylan, Vincent Van Gogh, Pablo Picasso, Thomas Edison, Galileo Galilei, Aristotle.

Make your own list of historical figures or people from your own life and ask if your life wouldn't rap hollow if these people had buckled or acquiesced. Their divergence made them brilliant. How dare we strip teens of the opportunity to cultivate their own unique brilliance?

## **MENTOR EXTRAORDINAIRE**

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Jamie Oliver caught my attention in December 2009 when he received the prestigious TED Prize for his work to "create change on both the individual and governmental level." I had been aware of his work to encourage people in England to make healthier choices in their lifestyle and diet. Many of you are probably aware of Oliver's efforts to ban unhealthy food in England's schools in favor of a diet based on fresh, nutritious fare.

Fewer people may be familiar with Fifteen Foundation, which Oliver started in 2002. Each year his foundation trains teens in the culinary arts and restaurant business. Most significant is that many of these teens have criminal records, a history of drug use, and other high-risk behavior. At first glance these youth don't necessarily commend

themselves to the culinary arts. What's clear is that Fifteen Foundation is a vehicle for human enrichment. Through the process of teaching teens to be exceptional chefs, the Foundation encourages youth to develop character, self-respect, and ambition.

Trusting relationships between mentors and young people are at the heart of this remarkable enterprise. The training process utilizes an apprenticeship model in which the apprentice shadows the master chef. Mentor-chefs introduce youth to food, farming, and cooking. Throughout the apprenticeship they also help the youth with a range of personal challenges.

None of this good work would be possible without a fundamental shift in perspective on the part of Oliver and his staff. Most of the world sees these teens as unreliable youth destined to a life of crime, drug use, and dependency on government resources. Fifteen Foundation views youth through a different lens; it sees beyond the exterior and behavior, the coarseness and tattoos, to unique humans endowed with talent, dignity, and promise.

## GET IN GEAR

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I was once working with a classroom of teens who were not very engaged. Then I happened to mention how I'd recently been listening to Nirvana's *Lithium*. (I wasn't even sure they'd know of Nirvana.) I shared how impressed I was by the power of music to create emotion. All of a sudden the class came to life and we talked at length about music, its power, and our need for self-control in order to remain free amid captivating, emotive influences like *Lithium*. They were actively engaged.

It is helpful to distinguish between passive engagement and active engagement. Passive engagement means that a teen may be paying attention, listening, and even asking questions but she is not concerned or

curious about how the conversation relates to her. This was the nature of most students in the class before I mentioned the power of music. Teens who are passively engaged may even be amused and entertained by a video or a humorous speaker. Still, in these situations we can't confuse their apparent interest with active engagement.

The students in my example came alive when I mentioned the power of music. It was something to which they could all relate. But still they weren't actively engaged. A student paying attention or participating in a discussion is not necessarily actively engaged, however, such interest is a critical precursor to active engagement.

The primary difference between active and passive engagement is curiosity. Teens that are actively engaged are focusing energy into trying to sort out how they relate to the conversation. Though it may not be obvious to us, they are translating our message from something abstract and impersonal into something concrete and personal.

To cultivate active engagement I knew I needed to promote the following components:

- Focus—Distractions are blocked out.
- Alignment—A shared sense of purpose binds everyone involved. In this example, it was music.
- Relevance—The discussion has implications for how we live our life.

Engaging teens opens the door to deeper interactions. Engagement provides the opportunity for teens to interact with ideas that are meaningful to them. When teens sense this they block out distractions and focus. This can generate momentum. The plane is leaving the hanger and getting ready to take flight. We must turn our attention to how we can make the most of this journey.

## CURIOSITY'S KEY

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Adolescents crave recognition. They long for adults to be curious about them. They say and do crazy things, isolate themselves, and weave webs of blessed contradictions. Are we supposed to recognize them in their insanity? Yes. Recognize the human behind the insanity.

So often, teens are unnoticed by well-meaning adults because the adults don't get it. They don't understand the story, the play, the sport, or clothing style. How do we typically respond when we don't understand something we care about? We ask questions. We seek to understand. Why? We want to understand. To influence teens we have to want to understand. We have to want to be fascinated. Then we learn, and have the potential to make a difference.

Why aren't we more naturally curious about teens? When we are curious about adolescents we risk. We risk rejection. We risk them making fun of us. We risk them getting angry. We risk making mistakes

But what does curiosity look like? Curiosity does not have to be invasive. I do a thought experiment both with individual teens I'm meeting with, and when I'm in a class of twenty-five adolescents. I think of myself as a huge mirror. Anyone that I look at has the opportunity to see himself. I reflect back to him what I see. But to do so I have to focus. I have to really see.

Herein lies the key. By reflecting what I see I am reflecting that I see. It's not merely that I am noticing his shirt, new shoes, or cool headphones. These things are trivial. His humanness is not. I might notice these things but I reflect back that I see the person behind the shirt, shoes, and headphones.

Note there is a progression. First, we need to be curious. You are curious about other things. Apply this natural curiosity to teens. Part of this first step is to consider barriers to our curiosity. Second, learn how to reflect back to

teens what we see. How will they respond best? Some teens appreciate simple comments. Some despise them. We will have to be thoughtful and creative.

The greatest compliment my dad ever gave me was a simple observation. He said he noticed I was able to anticipate where the soccer ball was going to go before another player kicked it. That was it. Nothing protracted or sappy, just a simple observation.

Why was it so powerful? Why has it remained with me? Consider all that this comment communicates:

- 1) My dad was watching my soccer games, not just passively occupying a bleacher.
- 2) My dad was studying me. He saw my unique characteristics, those traits that set me apart as an individual.
- 3) His statement was an observation, not a compliment (i.e. “good job”).

Look at a teen’s face and spot something you’ve never noticed before. What do you notice? Maybe you notice a freckle, the shape of his chin, or the fact that your son has started growing facial hair. This is a start. You are assuming a posture of curiosity. You don’t have to let him know you are studying him. What’s most important is that you are consciously, deliberately, and tenaciously noticing.

## **THE ENGAGED LIFE**

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There is only so much you and I can do to positively contribute to the lives of teens. All people are multifaceted. The most advanced computer cannot rival the complexity of a human being. This means that a particular input from us will not necessarily produce a particular outcome. It may not even produce a desirable outcome. We may expect, for example, that having a pleasant conversation with a teen might result in less conflict and more coopera-

tion between us and a teen. This is a reasonable expectation and may, in some cases, be accurate, especially if these kinds of positive interactions are a pattern and not isolated incidences. But there are no guaranteed outcomes. Much of what informs teens and their decisions lies beyond our control.

Confronted with this reality we may be inclined to despair. One response to such despair is to opt out of the relationship. We may remain physically present, but emotionally disengaged. We may wonder why we should bother making an effort if we can't know if any good will result. So we don't bother. Or if we do, we may resort to the use of techniques. They promise a guaranteed outcome. Think "Perfect abs in one week," and other magazine ads. These promise outcomes if we follow the technique. They give us the illusion of control and the hope of a desirable outcome. If I do X, Y will happen.

No human relationship offers a guaranteed outcome. The wisest response to this truth is to muster the courage to engage anyway; to not opt out or buy into the seduction of techniques. We must risk, and when we do, we will experience rewards as well as grief. These are guarantees. The joys and sorrows we experience through our courage are evidence that we are alive.

Commit to living with this courage and you will model for teens the engaged life. This may, after all, be the most potent way we can contribute to their lives.

## **FREEDOM**

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When I asked Sara if she wanted to throw paper airplanes, she was getting all of me. Counselors aren't supposed to indulge in frivolity. They're not supposed to leave their offices. I suspect anyone who works with teens

knows the pressure to stay within the prescribed bounds and protocol for who we should be and how we should act. Unchecked, this allegiance can lead to an inauthentic fabrication of our real selves.

Being authentic is hard work. There are many significant barriers to authenticity. You may be a teacher nearing retirement, jaded by years of working with teens, or a parent who is seeing her teen slip away, feeling unsure, even panic-stricken, but without a clue about what to do next. So we become either more rigid or lazier. We set unrealistic, unhelpful boundaries out of sheer desperation, or fall away in exhaustion. We are trying to find the magic bullet that will make it all better. Look no further, I want to say to every adult. If a bullet exists, that bullet is to be found within you.

This is not some esoteric concept. There is nothing mystical about it. Within each of us is a human being who is spontaneous and wise. Barriers keep this person at bay, afraid to act, fearing, “But what if I make a mistake?” We try to have all the answers when we know in our heart of hearts that our answers are contrived and meant to give us a sense of control, whether the setting is a classroom or our living room.

We’re going to make mistakes. We need to get used to it. We need to swallow that bitter pill. Profound and life-giving is the recognition that we’re making our mistakes on the road to authenticity.

If we want to make the greatest possible difference in the lives of teens we need to make this shift. We need to realize that we are the best we have to offer teens. They watch us. They study us. What makes the greatest impact is who we are; the decisions we make, how we treat them, how we treat other people in their presence. These are the factors that create and strengthen the connection, so that when it comes time to make a request of teens, help them in a decision, or communicate something to them, it will actually make a difference. Why? Because we’re connected. We have a relationship, and with that in place teens may actually care about what we think. They may not agree, they may choose differently, but that’s because they are free. We often forget this. If influencing teens was about controlling them, about guaranteeing an outcome, we could create and follow an instruction manual. Relating to them as the individuals they are is much more difficult, and much more rewarding

When Sara saw me, a grown adult, be spontaneous, she saw an expression of my own internal freedom. She saw what life could be, and that living is a dynamic process. Freedom is achieved through toil and patience within us, and on occasion a spring comes forth. This is the water from which teens will drink. Our task is to make the spring available.