

I Was That Boy. Who Gets the Grace to Grow Up?

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On the second day of school this year, a student put his hands on me. I let him walk away, and looking back on that moment, I believe what happened next may have taught him more about becoming a man than anything I could have written on the board.

The first few days of school are important to me for reasons that have little to do with curriculum. Yes, we do the icebreakers, learn names, establish expectations and begin figuring out how we will exist together for the next ten months. But while my students are getting to know me, I am quietly studying them.

I am trying to establish a baseline for every child in the room. I notice facial expressions, mannerisms, the pitch of their voices and how they interact with other students. I notice who can't stop talking, who barely speaks, who jokes when nervous and who needs a little movement just to make it through class. I put those things into a mental memory bank because three months from now, when the kid who never stops talking walks through my door completely silent, I want to recognize that something has changed before I start asking what rule he has broken.

That is part of teaching that doesn't appear on a standardized test.

On that second day, one young man was already testing boundaries. He was talking while I was talking, so I redirected him. When it continued, I moved his seat. He began talking to another student, so eventually I asked him to spend a few minutes in the back of the room so I could continue teaching and he could collect himself.

Instead, he began banging on the desk.

I told him that if he couldn't stop, I would have to call an administrator. He told me that was fine because he wanted to leave anyway. I looked into the hallway, saw no one there and told him to give me a moment while I called for someone.

I turned around and heard footsteps.

When I turned back, he was coming toward me. He ran into me, cursed at me and pushed his way past. For a moment, I had a choice to make. I could have grabbed him, blocked the doorway or allowed my pride to convince me that because a child had just disrespected me in front of my class, I needed to prove who was in charge.

Instead, I watched an angry boy walk down the hallway.

My ego survived, and more importantly, so did the possibility of our relationship.

His behavior wasn't acceptable, and allowing him to leave didn't mean allowing him to escape consequences. He received discipline and eventually returned to my classroom. When he did, we talked. Today he greets me with a smile. We joke with each other. We laugh. Somewhere inside those ordinary interactions, I hope he is learning lessons that aren't written in my curriculum: what restraint looks like, what forgiveness feels like and what it means to receive grace after you've done something wrong.

Maybe years from now he won't remember what lesson I taught that week. But perhaps he'll remember that on a day when he lost control, a grown man had enough control for both of us.

I understand that boy because I was that boy.

I was an angry kid who didn't always understand what to do with the anger inside me. Adults could see my behavior without understanding what produced it. They could see the mistake without always seeing the child making it. Had the worst decisions I made as a teenager become the permanent definition of who I was, my life would look very different today.

That is why I have been thinking so much lately about a simple question: Who gets the grace to grow up?

That question came back to me as I followed the recent confrontation involving Nadim Kashouh, the owner of Nadim's Downtown Mediterranean Grill, and two teenagers. According to police and published reports, the young people, ages 17 and 18, left after attempts to pay a \$92.40 restaurant bill were declined. Police allege that Kashouh subsequently followed them and that a confrontation occurred involving allegations of physical violence and a firearm. The teenagers are expected to face complaints related to the unpaid bill. Kashouh has pleaded not guilty to the charges against him and has said that he acted in self-defense.

Those allegations belong in the legal system, where evidence can be examined, competing accounts can be heard and responsibility can be determined. I wasn't there, and neither were most of the people commenting about it online.

But another trial has already taken place on Facebook, and some of what I have seen there troubles me almost as much as the incident itself.

I have watched adults celebrate the idea of a grown man pursuing teenagers over an unpaid restaurant bill. I have read comments that seem to treat the confrontation not as an escalation that could have ended terribly for everyone involved, but as a story about somebody finally teaching “**these**” kids a lesson.

I believe young people should be held accountable when they do wrong. I also believe we have confused accountability with something much darker when we begin celebrating the possibility of violence against children because we disapprove of what they did.

I have never personally dined and dashed, but I understand teenagers making stupid decisions because I made plenty of them myself.

There was a period during my teenage years when I was couch surfing and homeless. Back then, I remember getting excited whenever one of my friends got a job because sometimes that job came with what we called “the hookup.” One friend worked at KFC back when they had a buffet. He told me to come around four or five, when certain managers weren’t around, and he would get me something to eat.

Sometimes that was one of the only meals I ate that day, and I was incredibly grateful.

As a teenager, I thought I had a great friend. As an adult, I understand something else: that food wasn’t his to give away. It belonged to the restaurant, and what we were doing was wrong.

My circumstances help explain why that meal meant so much to me, but they don’t magically make taking it right. Both truths can exist at the same time. A young person can make a bad decision and still deserve our humanity. Circumstances can explain behavior without excusing it. Consequences can exist alongside compassion.

Most importantly, a teenager can be wrong without being permanently defined by what he did when he was 17.

That space between the foolish teenager and the responsible adult is what we call growing up, yet America has not always given Black and Latino children the same amount of room to occupy it.

Researchers have documented what is often called **Adultification Bias**, in which Black children can be perceived as older, less innocent and more responsible for their behavior than white children of similar ages. Long before many Black boys become men, some people have already stopped looking at them as boys.

We have seen versions of this before. During the 1990s, Americans were warned about an emerging generation of juvenile “**superpredators**,” supposedly remorseless young criminals who would terrorize communities. That prediction never materialized the way it was presented, but the rhetoric helped reinforce something that has been much harder to erase: the tendency to

look at certain children, particularly Black and Latino children, and see danger before we see childhood.

Sometimes I wonder whether we eliminated the language without eliminating the instinct.

Today it can appear in a Facebook comment insisting that teenagers "**deserved**" whatever happened to them or celebrating the idea that somebody finally "**taught them a lesson**." Yet I wonder how quickly that language would change if we replaced the young people in a surveillance video with our own children.

Imagine your 17-year-old son or daughter does something incredibly stupid. Maybe they leave a restaurant without paying. You would probably be furious. You might make them return, apologize and pay every penny. You might take away privileges, make them work to repay the money and allow whatever appropriate legal consequences follow.

But would you want an armed 60-year-old chasing them down the street?

That is where accountability and vengeance separate from each other.

I can also understand something about the restaurant owner's perspective, because running a business is extraordinarily difficult. Restaurant owners invest money, time, reputation and pieces of their lives into keeping their doors open. Employees call out, food costs rise, customers complain and vacations get postponed. A cook doesn't show up and suddenly the owner is in the kitchen. A server calls out and now the person who owns the place is also the host, manager and problem solver.

Then somebody leaves without paying.

I can understand the anger. I can understand feeling disrespected. I can even understand the bruised pride that comes from believing someone has taken advantage of something you spent years building.

Understanding an emotion, however, is different from excusing what someone chooses to do with it.

Adulthood is supposed to give us something teenagers are still developing: the ability to feel rage without surrendering our judgment to it. There were alternatives available. Surveillance footage could be preserved. Police could be called. Identifying information could be provided to investigators. The legal system could determine what consequences were appropriate.

That is why the reaction from some adults bothers me so much. We cannot spend our days demanding that teenagers develop self-control while celebrating adults when they appear to lose theirs. We cannot tell young people that the mature thing to do is walk away from confrontation and then cheer when grown people pursue it. We cannot tell boys that becoming a

man means learning to control their emotions and then redefine rage as strength whenever an adult feels disrespected.

Most of all, we should be extraordinarily careful about becoming comfortable with firearms entering confrontations involving children.

I think about Trayvon Martin here, not because the circumstances are the same—**they are not**—but because his death forced this country to confront a question we still haven't completely answered. Trayvon was 17 years old when George Zimmerman shot and killed him in Florida in 2012. Zimmerman maintained that he acted in self-defense and was ultimately acquitted.

The comparison I am making is not about the legal facts of these two cases. It is about perception.

When we look at a Black teenager, how quickly do we stop seeing the child and start seeing the threat?

Who gets to be young in America? Who gets to screw up, mature and someday tell the embarrassing story about the unbelievably stupid thing they did when they were 17? Who gets to look back at 40 and say, "Thank God I grew up"?

Whose teenage mistake becomes evidence of who society believes they were all along?

Grace does not mean pretending wrongdoing didn't happen. The student who pushed past me was wrong, and I would be doing him no favors as his teacher if I pretended otherwise. The teenagers involved in the restaurant incident should be held accountable for whatever wrongdoing the legal process establishes, just as the adults involved should be accountable for their own decisions.

Grace is not the absence of accountability. Grace is refusing to make someone's worst moment the final definition of who they are.

As parents, educators and neighbors, we should teach our children to pay what they owe, respect other people's businesses, keep their hands to themselves, control their anger, walk away from unnecessary confrontations and accept consequences when they are wrong.

But our children are watching whether we follow those rules too.

Every morning, that student who pushed past me gets another chance to walk into my classroom. I could have become another adult he hated, another grown man who answered his anger with more anger and another memory he could use to justify believing that nobody understood him anyway.

Instead, I get another chance to teach him, and he gets another chance to become someone greater than the angry boy who lost control on the second day of school.

Maybe that is what our community needs more of—not fewer consequences, but more adults capable of delivering consequences without abandoning children; not adults who confuse restraint with weakness, but adults strong enough to understand that sometimes the most powerful thing you can do when a child loses control is refuse to lose yours.

Because the 17-year-old who makes a terrible decision today may someday become a teacher, a father, a business owner, a mentor or a community leader. He may spend the rest of his life becoming someone the angry teenager he once was could never have imagined.

I know because I was that boy.