

TEENS & FACE
Coming of age in 2007
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Face is back as an issue for teens. There is a new fascination with gangster movies and “gangsta” rap, and how a boy, who wants to be seen as a man, maintains face. I watched recently as my son gave his son a talking to over some stupid behavior. The talk was earnest and good: the effect was a disaster. There was a friend along who witnessed the scene and so there was little attention paid to what was being said, and instead an awkward desire for it to be over. The son lost face in front of a friend, and the father had failed to communicate by choosing the wrong time and place for the encounter.

A cartoon in *The New Yorker* (Weber, 11/27/06) shows a mother and teen at a doctor’s office where the doctor says to the mother, “I’m sorry, but so far medical science hasn’t come up with a cure for adolescence.”

In the Kalahari desert, The !Kung people, who have lived in the same place for as long as human time, surviving in one of the harshest climates we know – refer to adolescents as, “The owners of the shade.”

With the rise of rap and hip-hop, the concept of face has returned as a way for teens to manifest their need for respect. Just at the moment when a teens’ behavior seems most irresponsible and immature, is when the teen wants to be seen as responsible and mature. They seek affirmation from the parent that they are becoming an adult and deserve respect. When the parent treats them as a child, often for good reason, they feel that loss of face. With that loss of face the teen goes back into the shade and cuts off communication.

During this transition there is great potential misunderstanding. It is a time when it is good to choose one’s battles carefully and keep the focus on the result. If the

outcome of an interaction is loss of communication, then however legitimate the parent feels, they have lost the encounter. The intention may be good but the effect can be a breakdown in an already delicate situation.

Rap has given rise to the “gangsta” sense of face. Each generation has to have its own cultural code. This code only works if the parents don’t get it. For my generation it was rock, and the more the elders complained, the louder you turned it. Their anger was proof that the code worked. So now when parents complain about gangsta rap as being homophobic, misogynist and obsessed with status, the teen can think, good, it worked.

My twenty year old son is a successful Rapper in Cambridge, Mass. The first two Cds my son put out were the worst of gangsta: *bullets, bling, benzes...* you get the picture. As to the content, I was silent. But I continually praised the fact that he was working with language, mastering a form, learning the art and business. The third Cd I love to listen to and pass it around with pride. Should I have objected to the earlier content? There was no need, my distaste for it was obvious by my being mute on the subject – but as I said nothing, no words deriding the genre, no face was lost, and we were able to keep talking. Call it the crab approach: never talk head on to the point, but find ways of talking about other things that will eventually lead to what you really need to talk about. This is the sideways approach that avoids direct confrontation and works to maintain communication.

Isn’t it interesting how good talking in the car is? The teen can look straight ahead, you are beside each other, not head on: sideways. As you drive you can talk about many things as you circle around what you really need to talk about waiting for the moment to be right. For an overworked tired parent this requires great forbearance and patience: every bit of patience will be worth it in the end.

So how do you keep the conversation going? Ronald Berger in his beautiful and honest piece, *I Saw a Playhouse, My Daughter Saw a Jail* (New York Times, 1/28.2007) describes an attempt gone wrong, as it so easily can. Berger writes, “I had behaved as though Anna was my surrogate, her behavior a reflection of my parenting skills, her beliefs a mirror of my ideals, her goals a product of my ambition.” So with that strong caution in mind we look for a mutual passion. The Arts offer a mutual passion that is all about communication.

If parent and teen share love of a genre of movies, go to theatre together, paint or write, then they can talk to each through the medium of art. My wife is a singer and voice teacher. A mother and daughter, after a breakdown of trust in their relationship, decided to take singing lessons together and after the lessons have dinner. The mother saw this as a way to heal, to find something else to talk about, and to have special time together. This is hard work for the mother as she has two other teen-age children. They have been coming to the house for singing lessons for about a year, and now they have lots to talk about: us, our cats, the house, the songs they are working on, and life in general. They can talk sideways – they can gossip about all sorts of things first and then start to have the serious conversation they need to have,

The same approach works with young children. A boy wants to play with swords. I can forbid it, or I can say, lets see how many different types we can find and then lets make one from wood. Now we are doing carpentry together and there is no better teacher than tools. If I stop a river there will be trouble, but I can work with a river to change its course and maintain flow.

Enculturation is what anthropologists call the way knowledge is passed from one generation to the next. For indigenous peoples it is there in storytelling, song, dance, painting, theatre, poetry, weaving. It is part of everyday life. For us, we have to invent new forms of enculturation that can compete with television, computer and Ipod. By seeing and experiencing Art together, we can show knowledge passing down generations. Every story we see or read is always some form of coming of age story.

If the Arts have been there in the atmosphere of a home, then that language of Art will always be available. If I can say to my daughter, *you remember when Katherine leaves Heathcliff and he goes running barefoot in the snow on the moor?* That lets us talk about someone else's behavior, and through that character we can talk about our own behavior. I love you, its your behavior drives me crazy! For teens to have Art as a resource is to have the experience of others who have gone through the same transition they have, and have then done art about it. Every high school has a Romeo and Juliet story.

We, as adults, are still trying to figure out if we really are adults. We say, *but I don't feel fifty, there's still part of me that's eighteen.* We start out wishing we were

older and end up wishing the opposite. But think how we treasure that wild and precious time when we were coming of age in a dazzling new world. What we know in hindsight is that life happens lightning fast. The teen years that seem to the parent like forever, go past so fast. A parent in the middle of a teen crisis is caught in the headlights. They think it will always be like this. What is hard to do is in that moment of stress, is to take all the time the moment needs: to slow time down. Art, the making of it or loving it, slows time down.

Though the teen years are fraught, and teens can be, *the owners of the shade*, we know the sun will shine again. We know it is a phase. Art helps us keep a record of those changes. We can look at a piece of art and say, *look, you did that at fourteen and now your work is going in this direction, how interesting.*

If my intention in discipline is good, but the effect is loss of face and silence, then I failed. To maintain flow in a relationship is to always find ways of talking. Stagnation is the bitter silence between teen and adult. Patience and a shared love of the arts can keep communication flowing. We need to help the teen maintain face as we seek opportunities to show respect. Perhaps the parent's hardest lesson is being able to let go of the child and welcome the young adult. So talk sideways like the crab – talk in circles – you'll get there quicker in the end.