

Sermon: Raising a Sane and Successful Teen  
By Mary Ann Maggiore, Given June 26, 2022 at UUCMC

My heart is very tender as I come here with you today because one of the last times I was in this space, I was leading a memorial for Chris Snowden who had died at the age of 19 at a military camp.

And because as the summer round of parties gets under way in community after community, I hear the worried talk of parents and neighbors wondering at the horror of teen suicide, of drunken deaths

on highways or the CDC reports that one in every four teenage girls has a suicide plan. These are grave problems, but grave problems

can generate great solutions – solutions that begin with the first act of love which is paying attention.

No matter who you are

or what your relationship to young people may be

I believe there is

in this time and

in this space

an agreement

That peace among people of all ages is essential

For our collective happiness.

And so looking back in your time and mine

I Believe that

Once you had a dream.

You dreamt of love

And you dreamt of community

The young people in your life, on your street, where

You work, are all a part of that dream.

Once you knew a baby

And the baby taught you

To know of all babies

You did not have to be a doctor or a scholar to

Know the reason you heart grew tender then

toward all the world's children

Now you know a youth or some or many

And these youths teach you

Of their world and your own.

Teenagers.

We speak of them as aliens

As strangers.

As a people apart.

Forgetting ourselves and our pasts.

We say the age is different, the time is different

The booze, the drugs, the parties are different.

Steeped in a language of contrasts,

We dare not see

The similarities.

Once we were awkward and selfish

And variable.

Once we lacked a plan, a budget, a timetable

A focus, A framework.

Once we lived in a room cluttered with

dirty coffee cups, unfinished term papers,

wrinkled apple cores or flattened pizza boxes

And dirty laundry.

We decorated our rooms with posters

of half-naked men

and half-naked women

And yet, when we entered our majority  
It was as if  
From the deepest part of Lethe's waters  
We forgot everything and became  
Amused, bemused, all knowing, refined.  
Dressed in smooth cloth, matching patterns,  
Bills paid or not, trusts forgotten or not  
Loving schedules and protocols  
More even than we have loved  
Our own.

The bee is busy because it knows no  
Knowledge.

It cannot think, it moves summarily,  
it makes honey

And dies.

But we have minds, learning, knowledge

And are often more than busy

And yet often do not make even honey.

We observe neither nature, nor its heart

Which is love.

But we cannot, we may not

Stop loving your children,

Little or Big.

We can, we must, begin to see them

And hear them and guide them

Not by external protocols

But by our own.

Your youths do not need more freedom

They need more You.

And sometimes less of you.

To raise a child to womanhood, to manhood,

You two – your daughter or your son and you –

Will need to make this,

Your own concoction, your titration

Of things that work, of rituals that heal,

Of conversations that progress to somewhere

Of adventures of both sorrow and joy.

In the life of the youth you know – your child, your grandchild, your niece or nephew, your

Neighbor,

You and only you can do your own unique wizardry --

This magic, this conjuring, this shamanic leadership

And in the end all will be gained

And none will be lost.

You will create new ways of being and new methods, because you are anointed

By love and a true knowledge of your own true past

I began with two simple methods and went no further

And never had to.

These methods were actually two simple rules. When each of my children were of an age of understanding I met with each separately. At the right place and the right time, a peaceful, sunny morning. The conversation started on a note of truth, followed by a note of optimism. Something like:

“I’d like to make sure we are always in good communication with each other. You get what you need and I get what I need. So I am going to suggest two rules that I think will work for both of us....”

Then I launched in.

**“Rule Number One -- You must have good manners.** This means you must be kind to me and kind to others in the world. Don’t become a doormat. But do take care, whether it’s at the dinner table or getting onto a bus, that you treat people with respect.

**“Rule Number Two – As much as it is within your power, you must seek to survive me.** Don’t do anything so stupid or so dangerous that it might get you killed. Your job is to live long after I do.

These rules are so simple, they are almost laughable. You would think at first that they couldn’t do much. Yet, oddly enough, I have found over many years of practice that these rules cover a tremendous amount of ground. And here’s why.

As regards Rule Number One, though we often forget them, manners are the great civilizing power of our species. Manners are what keep us from punching people when we are angry. Manners steady us when the line at the post office seems so tedious.

Manners help us slow down, and look before we act, think before

we speak. In those moments where manners lay their claim, compassion often steps in, giving us a chance to not only act more reasonably but to see more clearly beyond ourselves. This “seeing beyond one’s self” is one of the most important skills you can help your teen attain.

Every time we say please or thank you, or hold the door, carry a grocery bag, tell someone we love them, chew with our mouths closed, we are increasing our manners quotient and also improving our lives and the life of the world around us. Regardless of their personality or their developmental level, this rule helps your teen create their own guidelines for behaving well in the world. And that’s so much of what great parenting is all about – that a young person eventually becomes self –motivated and does not need us to remind them of what needs to be done. They can approach a situation on their own and give it what they know it rightfully needs.

Kids want to be decent human beings. They like to be treated well. And they can be persuaded, more times than not, to treat others well, too. Even if they don’t always follow the rule, or even if they give the impression of not listening, the rule has an inner engine that will, over time, do its work. Be patient. Don’t fight over

it. Be firm. Step back. Let some time go. As time goes by you may see that the value of this edict can be very powerful.

Rule One gives your teen the guideline he or she needs to rectify many foibles: Forgetting to take out the garbage. Leaving wet laundry in the washing machine. Borrowing clothes without asking. Forgetting to take CD's back to the CD rental place. Neglecting to call when they will be late for dinner. When you point out any of these misfortunes, say how you want the situation corrected and leave the conversation without threats or anger. You will be amazed at how often situations rectify themselves.

So much for Rule One. Now on to Rule Two.

Rule Two as we have noted says: "As much as it is within your power, you must seek to survive me." Because the rule states, "As much as it is within your power," it offers your teen the chance to reason and take control of their situations. Gradually as your teen grows up, the Rule puts them in the driver's seat of their lives. They start by avoiding trying to hurt themselves because you have stipulated it as being for your sake. But ultimately they will see the

wisdom of these words and start to make more judicious choices in general.

Rule Two covers a multitude of areas. It can be invoked to warn a teen off a crazy diet, or convince them to quit smoking. It can also help them to see that self-destructive behaviors may hurt others as well as themselves. This will give them an out when there is a crazy bungee-jumping-off-of-bridges escapade being planned. A breezy “My mother made me promise not to die before she does,” can show a sense of good humor in telling a friend “no.” This is the kind of “no” that just might save your kid’s life. And other kids’ as well.

We don’t want to raise kids who cannot take risks, who are afraid of healthy adventure. We also don’t want to raise kids who think we don’t care, and because they think we don’t care will do things that they are not ready for or which will put them in high chances of mortal danger. When your child says, as each of mine has, “I’m going out to this party tonight and I’ve got a ride home,” and you say, “Who’s driving?” and they say “Jake.” And you say, “Isn’t Jake the kid who was kicked out of school for coming drunk to math class?” And your teenager says “Yeah,” then you’ve clearly

got a Rule Two situation. You don't want your child in a car with a person who has a drinking problem. So, you invoke Rule Two. And it probably will go like this:

"I'm invoking Rule Two here. Jake is a danger in my book. Find someone else to drive you."

"Geez! Who?"

"I don't know who. Someone else. Then let me know."

"But I already told Jake I'd ride with him."

"Find someone else."

Being firm. Expressing your concern and offering an alternative solution will most often get you what you want. If not, bring out the big guns:

"I could always turn up at the party, you know."

Rule Two is like champagne. It's meant to be served up only on special occasions. Using Rule Two to keep your child from joining a sports team or from going shopping with kids you think are

dull, is not what it was made for. Using it to keep them from sleeping overnight at the home of a friend of a friend of a friend may be useful. You may be in negotiating mode here and that's okay. You're not being a coward. You're reasoning yourself and your teen to a successful outcome. You're heading up a family, not a military unit.

Rule One & Rule Two are so simple and so fair, and in a way, so funny to hear, that teenagers can get them and use them right away. Try them and see. What have you got to lose? They cost nothing. And they work.

Raising a teen may be  
the most important thing you every do

Raising a teen is a practice.

If you look upon it as a spiritual practice you will

See that it is bound not only by words, and action

But meditation and prayer.

You are a person of great fortune,  
A spiritual teacher has come into your life  
To show you a new, and variegated path  
Don't shun from it  
Don't neglect this opportunity  
To engage in this very high form of love  
For as Victor Hugo taught us  
To truly love is to  
See the Face of God.  
Once you had a dream....