

Bruce J. Gevirtzman



An INTIMATE
UNDERSTANDING
of AMERICA'S
TEENAGERS

Shaking Hands with Aliens

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Preface

Humble people don't write books.

When a person thinks that he has a lot to say and boasts himself as *the* expert on a subject, not much room remains for humility.

That said: I can't even imagine any other adult in America who knows more about teenagers than I do. So with great pleasure—and, yes, some trepidation—I now pass along my intimate understanding of America's adolescents to parents, teachers, teenagers, and anyone else with either a vested interest or a macabre curiosity.

This is no time to be humble.

As I began to reflect seriously on this project—looking over my notes, collections, and memorabilia—one major theme stood out: *The problems teenagers faced 40 years ago are identical to the problems they face today*. A huge difference, however, is that *today the intensity of those problems is way off the charts*. Modern technology and more aggressive media pose challenges never conceived of in the past. The lives of teenagers have been severely complicated by negligent parenting, mix-n-match families, and an apathetic, inadequate education system. Instead of inadvertently burning down Daddy's woodshed after playing with fireworks, kids today are burning CDs about raping and mutilating women. Instead of parents *and* teachers *and* lawmakers *and* society looking out for kids, today's kids have been left to fend for themselves.

Those who wish to crawl into the minds, hearts, and souls of America's teenagers have opened the right text. The anecdotes will amuse you; the stories will move you; the conclusions will startle you—and the prescriptions I offer you come after countless hours of observations, reflections, and analyses. An extensive career as a veteran high school English teacher, baseball coach, play director, and debate advisor has afforded me an opportunity to do an insightful examination of teenagers from the last four decades, while concentrating on the

most recent generation. I also divulge some secrets from my own experiences as a teenager, sometimes causing me to shrink with embarrassment, but always with a smile on my face.

Note: The students and other teens in this book are real. Their names have been changed, and/or they are composites of teenagers. Student writings and interview commentaries have been edited or paraphrased. Conversations have been recreated from my own memory, notes, and the recollections of others. All stories are true.

For a better understanding of the author's insights, those prescriptive sections that are aimed at parents should be examined by teenagers, too—and vice versa. All readers may benefit from the advice offered to teachers.

Introduction

“YOU MEAN, THEY’RE NOT BORN TEENAGERS?”

“They’re *people*.”

“Huh?”

“They’re people. Even though they’re not even four years old, they’re still people.”

I cowered; a mixture of guilt and fear surged through me. “But they still need to follow orders—to do what they’re told by their father.”

There! That would show her!

“They’re little kids, Bruce. They’re not robots or marionettes. Sure, they should listen to you, but you have to be careful about the *way* that you tell them.”

As my wife admonished me for expecting our two small children to follow my directions, I found myself only half-listening to her advice. Of course our kids were people. And I thought I’d always treated them as people; after all, I wasn’t standing behind them with a whip and chain, barking at them to build the pyramids of Egypt. Although sticking their hands into my bowl of cheese dip did not warrant a lethal injection, I figured raising my voice over this calamity *was* warranted. I had simply suggested the possible diseases that lurked on their unsanitary little mitts, and the chance they may actually *kill* somebody from not washing their hands and then poking them where they didn’t belong.

I had waited until later in life to have children. Parents never really know what to expect before they bear their first child, no matter how frequently others have warned them, no matter how many baby books they’ve read or child-birth classes they’ve attended. When they initially notice that their tiny baby resembles a prune atop a corncob, they think it’s the most beautiful child in the whole world.

And some parents believe this forever.

For me, however, there was only one major surprise at the moment of childbirth: *My new daughter had not arrived as a teenager!*

She wasn't 14. She was only 14 seconds! Rationally, of course, I knew my children would not be born teenagers; something inside me, however, told me they *ought* to have been born teenagers—because teenagers were all I knew. I'd taught high school for almost 30 years. I'd traveled with the debate team to other states and spent countless hours in cars and hotel rooms with teens. I'd spent six years coaching high school baseball, often being ejected from games by umpires because I had the audacity to defend my players from their incompetence. I'd read countless pieces of student writing that made me laugh and cry. I'd counseled teenagers about some of their most difficult problems. I'd directed teens in several plays I had written, mostly about adolescent social woes: drugs, sex, abuse, self-identity, and so on. I had been so close to these kids, I'd practically been one of them!

So as my own children entered the world, it was a huge shock that they had not come out already sporting baggy pants and bumpy pimples; instead, they were these miniature whatevers that only cried, spat, farted, barfed, and pooped. When I thought about how it was now my obligation to mold and nurture my crying, spitting, farting, barfing, and pooping baby into the kind of adult who would bring rave reviews of my fatherhood, I reeled in horror.

Mold my baby?

How would I do *that*?

For me, the baby years were the scary ones. Most people are afraid of what they don't know. I know teenagers; it's the little ones who have the inherent capacity to affect my episodes of acid reflux. This view may seem rather odd, because people dread teenagers more than they do babies. The number one phobia in America is probably public speaking, followed closely by the fear of death. I'll wager that right behind the fear of death is the horror of sitting at a Burger King with a couple of teenagers who are munching on cheeseburgers and punching keypads on their cell phones. Parents of younger kids worry about the future, when their children will have grown into adolescence. Parents of teenagers have empathy; they're already living it. And they constantly warn others:

"You think it's bad right now, Joe? You just wait. Pretty soon he'll be a . . . teenager!"

"Yeah, but not for 12 years."

"You gotta start preparing yourself now, Joe. Time goes a lot faster than you think."

"But how bad can it be?"

And the teenager's parent sends Joe a silent stare, as if to tell him, "You'll see, Joe; in good time, you'll see."

Many parents never catch on; they don't understand that anomaly of human development known as a teenager. Some parents are as much in the dark about teenagers as I am about babies—only worse, because babies have some rhyme or reason to them. Teenagers do not.

Teachers don't understand either. Most teachers only know these kids in the confines of their classrooms, content that all 15-year-old minds who sit before them are eager to digest their pompous utterances about Shakespeare, algebraic equations, or the Boston Tea Party. The truth, of course, is that teenagers have absolutely no desire to learn these irrelevancies, especially if they had just left the house as Dad was chasing Mom around the room with a tire iron—or they hadn't slept the night before, the result of dodging bullets in the latest gang-bang assault in their neighborhood. Real life-and-death issues tend to diminish the urgency of memorizing the periodic table of elements.

If I hadn't lived among teenagers for so many years, I wouldn't have a clue about the idiosyncrasies of teenage life; I would have been left fumbling in a maze of ambiguities, my own voice snarling: "What's with these kids!" And I would have echoed the words of my father—and his father, too: "Son, things were different, when I was your age..." As though profundities of this kind were going to change the lives of my students forever.

Now, I know better. In a sense, I have been researching this book for 35 years, accumulating stories, anecdotes, student writings, and memories—all of which have become indispensable. I actually look forward to parenting teenagers. Contrary to what a majority of parents think about themselves, I believe that I will do a far better job parenting teenage kids than I have done fathering my little ones (although I'm a pretty dandy daddy to my own kids, too)!

But I understand teenagers much better than I understand small children.
And I know what they need.

EARLY ENCOUNTERS

Long hair is back.

Pick a color: any shade of brown or black, with bleaches and dyes to match; frosted hair, streaked hair, highlighted hair; red hair of any shade; even green hair or blue hair or orange or pink hair—or any combinations of these colors.

Hairstyles abound: permed, curled, frayed; hair with droopy bangs, locks in the back, shaved on the sides, or a tall horn on top.

Cosmetic appeal has taken on some new—and freshly recycled—characteristics that have caught on with a vengeance: pierced ears, adorned with large looping earrings or shiny studs; ornaments that stick through any part of the face or body, including the navel and the tongue; the shaving of hair on every microscopic

part of the body—even the head; manicures, pedicures, facials, tush reductions, face lifts, tummy tucks, pectoral implants, and moisturizing skin applications; full-hour appointments in the beauty salon for actual hairdos; and regular applications of facial makeup and eyeliner.

And these are the *boys*!

When Bob Dylan droned in the late 1960s, “The times, they are a-changin’,” most of us shrugged our shoulders and smirked, “Yeah, right.” We were somewhere in the throes of adolescence ourselves, and we figured we were smarter than anyone else and certainly could read the trends of pop culture better than the over-30 crowd that moralized to us with an insufferable redundancy. Besides, if the times actually were changing, this had to be a good thing, right? Wasn’t change *always* good?

The hair and the clothes and the language: they’re constantly changing. The trends are claimed by the generation that breeds them, and that same generation—eventually fearing conformity—renounces those trends later.

Teenagers haven’t changed. When I first walked into a classroom as a high school teacher in 1971, I gazed at the kids in front of me and thought, “So this is how it is, and this is the way it’s always going to be. From now on—from this day forth—teenagers are going to look like this. They’re going to act like this, too. I already have them figured out. This is going to be easier than I thought.” After all, I was barely out of the teen years myself. What could be so hard about relating to these kids?

And then I began my teaching career.

I learned immediately that I was no longer a teenager; I wasn’t one of *them*. When I strode into my classroom on my very first day of teaching in my freshly laundered trousers, white shirt, plaid tie, and corduroy sports coat, I actually felt like an alien myself. For one thing, my head sported a crew cut. One of my male students thrust his fist into the air and shouted, “Sieg Heil!” And when I told him his comparison of me to Hitler was “utterly repugnant,” he showed his remorse over the incident by asking me what utterly repugnant meant.

My students have provided me with a constant source of humor—admittedly, much of it unintentional. In valiant attempts to disguise their weirdness at this age, a lot that escapes their mouths is full of surprising truths that are, well, *funny*.

In the early eighties, I was helping one of my student speakers polish the delivery of an oration she had prepared for an upcoming competition. That sunny afternoon she practiced tenaciously, but nothing seemed to be working. She had cotton in her mouth, her body slouched forward in a manner that made her look like the Hunchback of Notre Dame, and she kept forgetting her speech. Just as she bolted toward me, I threw my pen up in annoyance, thinking she had decided

to kill me, the result of her intense frustration. As I put my arms up to protect myself, she wailed, “Mr. G., you don’t understand! I’m a really good speaker! I just can’t speak in front of *people*!”

I’m still not entirely sure what she meant by that.

But it struck me at the moment—and still does—as very funny.

My introduction to teenagers, now from an adult perspective, confused me. Much of the residual weirdness from my teenage years had not worn off yet, and now working around adults—many of whom were especially *uncool*—made it difficult for me to take my job seriously. It was as though my students and I had journeyed here on a huge flying saucer from another planet. While on that flying saucer, we listened to music, danced, played softball, shared our deepest secrets, told jokes, and used lots of dirty words. Suddenly, we deserted the spaceship; I was asked to put on a coat and tie and become the boss. My foul language stopped abruptly. The others couldn’t call me by my first name anymore, as my new status required them to address me as *Mister*. Since I was not that far removed from being an alien myself, I truly understood them; I knew exactly where they were coming from, but I was now surrounded by scores of other adults who didn’t have a clue.

Complicated decisions had to be made. I wasn’t going to stay 23 years old forever. Someday I would be really, really old—maybe 40 or something. If I expected to reach middle age working around teenagers, I needed to embark on a course that would satisfy my life’s desire to make a difference in the world. But being a bona fide classroom teacher wasn’t enriching enough: the fruits of my labors were rarely immediate and often nonexistent. So *involvement* was the key—spending large quantities of time with students was the formula for success. Involvement would allow me to monitor their music, read their books, watch their movies, attend their functions, and mend their social ills. The prospect of spending so much of my life among aliens now seemed real—and *absolutely insane*!

ON ANOTHER PLANET

In early 1991 after our military had entered Kuwait for the purpose of liberating enslaved and tortured Kuwaitis from the invaders from Iraq, one boy on my competitive debate team who always wore a denim jacket and some kind of creepy plastic necklace quipped, “Mr. Gevirtzman, I suppose you’re happy now.”

“Happy about what, Robert?”

“Bush [the elder] is killing people.”

“No, Robert; it’s the Iraqis and their leaders who are *murdering* people.”

“Yeah, right.”

“Yes, Robert,” I persisted. “It’s absolutely true. We’re not happy about killing anybody; we’re actually saving some lives by our mission.”

Robert didn't flinch. "You just like violence."

"No, I don't like violence. But I hate evil even more."

"You know, Mr. G., one of these days we're gonna send thousands of troops to fight in Iraq, and lots of our guys are gonna die; it'll be like another Vietnam. And you old people who support war and killing..."

He stopped just short of accusing me of starting the war myself.

I flashed a knowing, pompous smile and winked at the other student debaters. "Don't worry, Robert. We're not going to fight in Iraq for long. Mark my words: Americans aren't going to be in Iraq after this year [1991]. Trust me."

Whoops.

Almost 15 years later: Robert, now a commissioned officer, has come home from another war in Iraq, after his second tour of duty.

So much for being able to trust the teacher's enlightened sense of world politics.

On Robert's opposite political pole were boys like Jack: Jack came to class wearing military fatigues every day; he drew fighter planes on his desk and pasted stickers representing different branches of the military on his notebooks. If anybody even hinted of disillusionment with America, Jack clenched his two fists and fought to control his anger. Jack contended that anything America did was good, and anything any other country did was bad.

That was in 1986, about the time President Reagan got ticked off at Muammar Gadhafi of Libya and blew up some of his family. Most of the teenagers didn't really care about Libya; they were too busy listening to Cyndi Lauper and planning their spring break in Grandma's swimming pool. They would then lie to everybody about how they got their great tans while romping on the beaches in Ft. Lauderdale.

Twenty-some years later, Jack's story has been written: Jack never joined the military; right after graduation he impregnated his girlfriend and left the state, denying any responsibility for his new daughter. He took odd jobs around various communities, and around 1989, he simply vanished from the planet. To my knowledge Jack didn't return for his class reunions, and he never helped to raise his kid.

Due to the complex nature of teenagers, teachers can't predict with much accuracy the destinies of their adolescent students. Only on the surface are certain traits obvious, and sometimes these so-called obvious traits are misleading; American adolescents are just too peculiar. The kids on the debate squads, in the theater productions, on the baseball teams, in various clubs I sponsored came from all walks of teenage life; I've had the experience of meeting thousands of teens, most of whom my mind had already reduced to an adolescent stereotype.

By the middle of the 1970s, I was still young enough to be cool; unfortunately, my personality, the product of a too-protective Jewish mother, and my character, the result of a truth-driven Polish-German father, brought not the slightest ring of *cool* to my persona: I still liked fifties doo-wop music, enjoyed dialogue in film, defended baseball as America's pastime, found politics exciting, adored cats, loved books, and coveted being alone; I didn't care for living out of suitcases, drove a 10-year-old car, preferred live musicals over rock concerts, and frequented Denny's Restaurants. I looked forward to the Academy Awards more than I did the Super Bowl, and—check this out—I viewed President Carter as a man with an exciting vision for America!

I was not *cool*.

Things that aren't cool bother teenagers.

Giving speeches isn't cool at all. Twice students have fainted in my classroom, both times over the stress of oral presentations. Once, a boy swaggered to the front of the room, his flowing blond hair radiating coolness; he walked like a man on a mission—to wow us with his every utterance. The girls smiled, eyeing him with admiration, in awe of his confidence. He had mustered the courage to give his speech—away from his trusted skateboard.

As the blond bomber reached his destination a few feet in front of a green chalkboard, he turned to face the class. He paused, made fleeting eye contact with a cute redhead in the front row, and then opened his mouth to speak...

It's never pretty when someone faints.

The boy's eyes suddenly became glassy; he rocked backward from his toes to the heels of his feet. What had been a slight smirk of confidence was now a barren visage. His body fell backward, his head slid down the chalkboard, and he crumpled to the tiled floor.

He now faced the most humiliating moment of his life so far: utter mortification, horrific embarrassment in front of his peers!

And in the blink of an eye, he had lost all of his coolness.

After the security guard finished cracking jokes and carted the unlucky bugger away, the other students began making sarcastic quips (which continued for the next six months):

John finally found a way to drop out of school!

Mr. Cool!

Encore!

It's the hair!

Beautiful! The three judges—9, 9, and 9.5!

Do it again! Do it again! We like it! We like it!

For weeks, just as someone went up to speak, another student would invariably chide, “Careful! Don’t pull a *John*!”

Making any kind of oral presentation is definitely not cool, so the kids usually hate it. The general teenage population—especially the popular kids—gazes at the competitive debaters as though they had just been snatched by one of the pods in *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. They see the speech kids as totally weird—geeks, nerds—hopelessly retarded in their social development.

On the other hand, the debaters don’t quite understand why the popular teens don’t enjoy traveling to speech tournaments on weekends and then competing against hundreds of other talented teenagers. Both groups of kids eye each other with curiosity, disdain, and—a little bit of envy.

But whichever group they happen to be in, the other one is weirder.

When I first entered education, most of the adults I knew, including the parents of teenage kids, shrugged their shoulders and sloughed off this strange, unpredictable age as “one of life’s phases they would grow out of soon.” But I was stuck on the thought that approximately five or six years for a *phase* is a very long time, especially when we consider all of the changes teenagers undergo: the development of their sexuality, minds, bodies, sexuality, social awareness, sexuality, spirit, and sexuality. (Did I mention their *sexuality*?) If a kid becomes an alien at age 13 and then starts to shed her alien status at age 18, imagine all the eardrum-thumping music that has permeated her auditory receptors, not to mention all the bad pizza she has consumed during those years.

I had to do *something* to affect the trends, to mold the masses, to sway the future.

To make a difference.

Our mission to better understand America’s teenagers will not always go smoothly; occasionally, we will shudder, as a scary chill runs through us. This often happens when we brace ourselves for the unknown. But as I have so richly discovered, the rewards for our courage can be immeasurable.

So: Onward! Into alien territory we march!

1

I'm, Like, All...

CLUELESS: A SCARY TRUTH

If and when creatures from outer space land on Earth, they will have a language all their own. As a kid I watched those early science fiction movies from the 1950s, and I wondered how those guys from Mars were capable of speaking perfect English, even better English than most of my classmates. Did that creature in the tight silver pants with the slick white hair really take courses in other languages before he began bugging people around our galaxy? Hey, maybe *everybody* in God's universe spoke perfect English (except for teenagers raised in Brooklyn)!

My first real introduction to an alien language—not including when my parents hid their discussions from me by speaking Yiddish—came in 1971; in fact, my first adult *personal* encounter with *Teenagese* (my term) occurred the very first moment I opened my mouth before a classroom full of students: “Okay, uh, let’s see, I, uh...”

Not exactly the most articulate utterance during those opening seconds of my career, and then a lovable chap from the middle of the class asked, “This guy—a poser or a hodad?”

Let’s see... I was still young and hip (I’m a lot hipper now, but this is measured in body mass, not in coolness), so what was I missing here? What was this twerp asking about me: *a poser or a hodad?*

Was he asking *me* a question?

Was he even speaking English?

This guy: a poser or a hodad?

I already knew from my own high school days something about the word *hodad*. A hodad was a guy who dressed like a surfer, walked like a surfer, talked like a surfer, but had never surfed a day in his life; in fact, he probably didn’t know *how*

to surf. Later, in 1973, *hodad* still connoted a phony but was not as bad as *poser*, someone who actually *thought* he was the real thing; in other words, these kids kicked off my career by refusing me the benefit of the doubt. I had auditioned for them that day as either a liar or a phony.

Take your pick.

And from there—for the rest of that first year—it was downhill.

Teenagers have a language of their own. Teenagese is parodied and idolized at once by media stalwarts who make mucho bucks from doing so—and mimicked by old farts who have forgotten that hundreds of years ago they were teenagers who had their own language, too. Those who chastise kids for their unique language advertise some jealousy, their haughtiness a weak camouflage for an utter disdain of getting older. Old people have no language of their own, unless it has to do with arthritis, flatulence, or their frequent bouts with constipation.

Critics hailed the 1995 film *Clueless* as an original—a jewel of creative thought and biting satire. I also loved this movie, but not exactly for those reasons. All students of film—and literature—know there's a fine line between the satiric and the real, and effective satire manages to posture itself barely on the acerbic side of that line. Sometimes it's difficult to figure out whether the literature is true life or a commentary on true life through the art of parody. *Clueless* had me stumped: On the one hand, the movie was funny and imaginative, as it depicted teenagers' customs, values, and codes of conduct in a caustic, humorous manner; on the other hand, my first viewing of the movie left me shrugging my shoulders (and laughing) over what I had seen. I thought it entertaining, but a social satire on modern high school kids?—I had my doubts.

This film came dangerously close to the truth. The teens were depicted as sex-crazed, party-hardy, air-headed, compulsive, impulsive, obsessive, possessive, narcissistic, materialistic, trendy adolescents, whose every other word fit a stylized, personalized vocabulary for teenagers in 1995.

What's satirical about *that*?

Experts tell us that it's easier to learn a new language when we're young. Unaware of the fundamentals of language acquisition, over decades American teenagers have unknowingly acquired newer (and better) ways of saying things. English is still English (sort of), but as these words have passed through generations, they have inherited entirely different definitions and usages. Like the white-haired guys—the ones from Mars—wearing the silver pants, generations of American adults have eventually learned the necessity for language understanding and idiom adaptation when it comes to teenagers.

FROM FANTABULOUS TO TIGHT

Two ramifications of developing language may pique some interest: first, decades of change in teenage slang, and second—a more serious topic—significant generational communication barriers (or, “Ohmigod! If I only knew what you *meant!*”).

Never in my life has anyone mistaken me for a cowboy (Jews and horses don’t mix). Despite this, I thought I had a pretty good idea how to describe a dude, even though cows weren’t my thing either, and I found them appealing only when they sat docile on my plate at a Black Angus Steak House. But around 1980 my male high school students began calling me *dude*. As I noticed this growing habit, I cautioned them that I was not now, nor had I ever been, a rancher. However, failing to comprehend my little play on words (which, admittedly, was not that funny, especially since I had said it 5,000 times), they persisted in their greeting: “Hey, dude, what’s up?” After which, I would look up and say, “The ceiling. That’s what’s up.” Which was very uncool—so uncool that they occasionally laughed about my nonexistent coolness.

I did, however, learn the rules: (1) A *dude* is a guy. The person who said *dude* was the cool guy, not necessarily the person to whom it was directed. (2) Only males may use the word *dude*. A female using *dude* sounded like she shouldn’t be a female (thus, an immediate deterrent for any girl desiring to use that word). (3) Jokes about this trendy slang word were off-limits. Adults who acted smug or ignorant about its application in conversation did not look brighter, smarter, or hipper. They simply looked like geeks. Around teenagers, many adults look like geeks no matter how hard they try not to look like geeks. Perception is everything in the teenage world; and since adults are perceived as geeks from the get-go, associated adult behaviors will serve to augment this perception.

Today *dude* is part of our culture; I probably use it more than his first name when I refer to my son. In the 1950s if teenagers thought something or someone was especially cool or hip or noteworthy or fantastic, two predominant words described that thing or person: one of those words was *fantabulous*. Notice the clever combining of the words *fantastic* and *fabulous*—although no generation of teenagers would have been caught dead elevating the use of the word *fabulous* to any level of coolness.

An example of its common usage: *Albert threw a fantabulous pass to his favorite receiver.*

Or, *How do you feel, Jack?*

Fantabulous!

Obviously, *fantabulous* wound up higher on the usage priority charts than *fantastic* or *fabulous*, both of which were forbidden words anyway.

Another word kids used for *fantabulous* was *bitchin'*.

An example of its common usage: *Albert threw a bitchin' pass to his favorite receiver.*

Or, *How do you feel today, Jack?*

Bitchin'!

Although the word *bitch* had other connotations, not the least of which were unpleasant or downright derogatory references to women, they were mild when contrasted with the meaning of the word *bitch* today. Teenagers, mostly through the predominant use of this word in modern pop culture—mainly rap music—have incorporated it as part of their daily vocabulary.

Recently, my students were quietly reading their books in class, when outside the room a young male voice summoned loudly and clearly, “Hey, bitch, get over here!”

The timing provided some irony: I had just finished a rather poignant lesson about the power of words and the ugliness of some of today's commonly used slang. Even I had to grin, since the good timing of the kid's gross comment amplified a valuable lesson about irony. But despite the gallows humor, I was saddened; a boy, presumably a decent teenager who attended our better-than-average high school, had casually called a girl—someone he probably knew—by this name.

And he thought nothing of it.

Worse, the girl ran to him with a big smile on her face. It was acceptable, if not customary, for a boy to call her a *bitch*.

I may go to my grave believing—despite opinions to the contrary—that the single worst influence on adolescent speech habits and, therefore, the principal impediment to linguistic decency among young people today is the influence of rap music. This music is packed with appalling grammar, incessant swearing, and blatant misogyny. When the Rolling Stones sang in 1965 that they couldn't get no satisfaction, I cringed. During college I was already enough of a grammarian to abhor the use of double negatives. A decade earlier, every time I heard Little Caesar and the Romans croon, “Those oldies but goodies *reminds* me of you,” I shrank in despair. My verb-subject-agreement-loving, eccentric self recoiled with the anguish of someone whose life had just been threatened. Don't get me wrong: these were good songs—classics—but they had poor structure, awful syntax, and unacceptable grammar.

Then it got worse.

Much worse.

Pimp has turned out to mean something good. Where I come from, if someone is a pimp, he buys and sells women who are called *prostitutes*. This is a *bad* thing; therefore, a pimp is a bad man. Today it's good to be a pimp, as in, “Hey, Johnny, whatcha up to, pimp!” This means, Johnny has had sex with a lot of girls—or at

least, he gets a lot of girls to come after him—right? Another: “Yo, bro! Wanna pimp my party!” This means the party I’m throwing is not very much fun—kind of boring actually—and a guy like you, with your elevated social stature, could make it a heck of a lot more interesting.

Whatever.

The word *pimp* stands for something superb—all anyone really has to know to see that the language has changed. The original culture of all this, by the way, is rap music. Pimps rule rap. Pimps strut their stuff on the rap videos, sometimes with scantily clad young women hanging on both arms. Pimps dress in expensive clothes, wear ostentatious jewelry, and drive fancied-up luxury cars. Twelve-year-old boys throughout America share grandiose dreams of someday becoming a pimp: to rule over women, to have sex with sluts, to slap around bitches and hoes.

Yes, *pimp* has become the modern version of *player* or—I’m going way back now—*playboy*. Only, being a pimp is better: it’s rougher, tougher, leaner, and meaner.

On another level, more benign changes in word use among teens have displayed an uncanny evolution: Take the word *bitchin’*, for example. We’ve already discussed how this word eventually took on new, unpleasant meanings among teenagers and the rest of our culture. What could possibly fill the vacuum left by *bitchin’*? Some held *fantabulous* as a possibility, but young people frowned upon this option; in fact, think about how nerdy the word *fantabulous* sounds today. Since its roots go back to the early sixties, something eventually had to replace a word that meant “really cool, utterly wonderful, way off the charts super”; in fact, *super* itself sufficed for a little while:

Hey, Jane, how ya doin’?

Super!

These days, when someone answers the question, “How ya doin’?” with “Super,” we figure he’s at least a hundred years old. This term reeks even more than *swell*, which makes all teenagers sound a lot like Wally Cleaver, a fictitious teenager who has been aberrant to every aspect of American culture except the sitcoms of the late fifties.

So, what came after *bitchin’* that stayed in the teen culture for a very, very long time?

Nope. Nice try, but *Far out!* didn’t come until much later—maybe five years or so—and it stuck around for quite a while, since so many of us thought the expression was, well, so *far out!*

The actual replacement for *bitchin’* was . . . *boss!*

No, this had nothing to do with an employer; it was all about being cool!

Hey, Ben, you got a boss-lookin’ girlfriend!

Thank you, Ben would answer.

Oh, Janine! You should see Jack's new car! It's so boss!

And if you *did* happen to have a high-caliber employer, you might hear the following: *Johnny works at Yummy Burger, and his boss is really boss!*

Well, maybe not. But right here in southern California the most popular radio station among teenagers during the sixties and early seventies was (amazingly) an AM channel. It was not uncommon for teens to listen to a loud, obnoxious D.J. who screamed, "This is 93-KHJ, Boss Radio!"

And what replaced *boss*, after its very good run as the king of teenage slang?

Groovy.

Boss and *groovy* ran almost simultaneously. *Groovy* did not command the limelight as long as *boss* did, having its high-water mark in 1966, when the Mindbenders released a number one song entitled, "A Groovy Kind of Love." But the Mindbenders were one-hit wonders, and *groovy* fizzled out with hippies, after hippies adopted *groovy* into *their* vocabulary. This, of course, was bad, since teenagers wanted to share nothing in common with hippies. Hippies, since most of them were in college or of college age, were *too old!* And then . . .

Enter *radical*.

This word *radical*, evolving from *fantabulous*, *bitchin'*, *swell*, *boss*, *far out*, and *groovy*, became popular about the time I started teaching at a public high school. It sounded familiar; after all, I had been a part of the hippie movement and a keen observer of the political spectrum. So why were my teenage students using a word that seemed to have little or no application to social politics? *Radical* had nothing to do with extreme left-wing ideas. It was not about "Hell no! We won't go!" It *was* about, "Ohmigod! You should see Dee's radical new clothes!" And this didn't mean she now had clothes that made her look as though she hung out on Telegraph Avenue in Berkeley; it did mean, however, that her clothes were, well, *bitchin'*.

Radical very quickly was shortened by the culture to *rad*. Everything was either *rad* . . . or it wasn't:

What a rad idea!

Lucy has a new boyfriend; he's so rad!

Rad lasted for a long time; right through the eighties, *rad* enlightened us about what we should appreciate and savor, as opposed to what we should overlook and shun. It became the mantra for acceptance. If you weren't *rad*, you probably hadn't been accompanied to the prom, asked to a party, or involved socially at lunch. *Rad* meant *cool* at a time when *cool* had become the registration card for even a minimally tolerable teenage existence; *cool* dominated the thinking of every teenager on the planet, a leading gauge for social acceptability.

Finally, something happened to *rad*.

When I finally acquiesced and reluctantly began to use it, it died; evidently *rad* had died long before I even realized it. Kind of embarrassing, I know. And when I said something to my students like, “Hey, guys, I got a rad idea,” they looked at me piteously; I once again had been way out of touch with the hippest language norms.

Moving into gear, I began to emulate my students’ descriptions of the cool and the utterly fantabulous to new levels of teacher stardom. I started to say the word *dope*, as in, “You did a really dope thing last night”—nothing to do with narcotics either. It was all about coolness. I felt *so cool*:

Louie, you got a dope friend!

Which is quite different from having a friend who is *a dope*—or worse—who *uses dope*. *Where* a teenager places a word in a sentence can mean everything. A *dope* friend is good. A friend who *is a dope* is bad. And having a *doper* friend is even worse (which places a lot of responsibility on that *-er* suffix, doesn’t it?).

This awkward use of words that have dichotomy-like meanings goes on and on. More recent trends in Teenagese have given us:

da’bomb—“Mike’s body is da’bomb!” Silly me, but I figured if something “bombed,” it was a bad thing. Oh, yeah. The reference here is to *da’bomb*. (Flash! My students have just told me *da* is no longer a viable prefix to *bomb*. Now they say, “His body is bomb.” In some nations they lament, “He blew up his body with a bomb.” Who knows what they’ll be saying by the time you read this!)

sick—“We want Kevin on the debate team; he always comes up with sick arguments.” Again, something normally very bad turns out to be exceptionally good, although a few people still may think using *sick* as an adjective presents a negative image. Silly them.

bad—“You should have seen that movie! It was bad!” How something bad can wind up good is the mystery here. Alas, simply remembering we are examining the language used by aliens solves this mystery!

My most recent research on this subject identified still another change in the cool-word label. The next word to take on *cool* in adolescent dictionaries is *tight*:

Jennifer, I aced the geometry test today!

Tight!

I’m not too happy with what I found out about this word’s derivation, so I now bolt from the subject by challenging you to figure out how this word may have originated, as your imaginations run straight into the gutter.

WHAT THEY SAY—WHAT THEY MEAN

Teenagers gossip—gossip freely—and gossip without a conscience; they have cornered the market on gossip. Teenage girls love to gossip; some girls have made this the cornerstone of their lives. Teenagers are very difficult creatures to communicate with, and even among those who favor verbosity, there is a tendency for an indiscreet warbling of ideas—an interminable, indiscriminate chatter. As a result, only an in-depth study of teenage communication can enlighten us about what kids *really* mean when they say something. This may come in handy when trying to figure out what teenagers actually think about adults; it also could be helpful when unearthing a kid who is slowly destroying his life with drugs.

Usually, though, communication goofs are not this serious. And we don't have time to conduct that in-depth study anyway; so let's become enlightened by the most popular teenage expressions—those offered by girls during a typical gossip session—and what their words *really* mean to the astute, discriminating ear:

Gloria, age 15: "Karen, I really love your new hair! It's so different now, but, like, in a good way!"

What Gloria means: "Karen, it's about time you did something with that crappy hair! None of us girls can understand why you had your hair like that in the first place. Not that it's so great now, but anything would be better than before!"

Kristin, age 16: "I told her what I thought, and she was, like, all... and then I go, 'So what's your problem?' and she's like, 'Nothing,' and then I'm all, like, 'Okaay!'"

What Kristin means: "I informed her of my own opinion, fully expecting to offend her. She reacted the way anyone in her position would react to such an insult, but I feigned surprise at her sensitivity, so I would appear to be bold and daring in her presence. She shrank in her defense, backing down to my admonition."

Brianna, age 16: "He's, like, so hot! I can't believe you don't wanna hook up with him! I mean, I'd, like, be with him in a minute, but... like, I see where you're comin' from. You have morals.... I understand."

What Brianna means: "He's much better looking than a lot of boys, and I'm really attracted to him. I'm a little mystified that you don't want to date him and possibly be his girlfriend. If you won't—which you probably won't—I'll have sex with him.... Of course, you always were a girl of character, of integrity, of high moral fiber.... You loser!"

Amber, age 15: "Come on, Jenna! There's no reason why we shouldn't go to that party. It's gonna be so fun, and everybody's gonna be there! Sometimes you just gotta do what you wanna do and forget about what other people tell you is right for you. You need to do what's right for you, Jenna!"

What Amber means: “Jenna, I want to go to this party, and I’m not going alone. What I need to do is sucker you into going with me. Yeah, there are going to be some vices there—booze, drugs, sex, and probably some fights the cops will have to break up—but doesn’t that sound like fun! Besides, Jimmy Reed is going to be there, and I’ve been waiting for this opportunity! Sometimes, Jenna, you should stop listening to your head and what you think is right, and just go with the flow.”

Teenage girls: you needn’t comment on the four previous interchanges. Your red faces (I can see them!) provide tacit support for the authenticity of the girls’ remarks and the validity of my interpretations.

CURSED BY WHAT THEY HOLD IN

It’s not that boys don’t feel or think; they just don’t like to *talk* about their feelings and thoughts nearly as much as girls do. They gossip less and tell fewer stories about people and things; teenage boys converse about *ideas* and *tangibles* (the risks of surfing, police misconduct, unfair teachers, etc.), but they are not into the psychological realm. Trying to bring a teenage boy into this orb is like asking him to pull his wisdom teeth when he’s 50 years old. When teenage boys have a disagreement, they duke it out and then go outside and play basketball together; when teenage girls have a disagreement, they revisit their old grudges at their 50-year class reunion.

Girls emote.

Boys suppress.

Scott wallowed in his secrets. He was like an overinflated tire: crammed with air, bulging on the sides, ripe to burst; so after he began angrily stomping his right foot during baseball practice, digging his cleats into the hard soil around home plate and making a crater that would someday rival the Grand Canyon, I called him into my office.

“What were you thinking out there, Scott?” I chided my stocky second baseman. “Do you realize how ridiculous you looked at practice today?”

His jaw clenched and his face turned purple, but he merely nodded.

That was it: a nod. I wanted to provide him an outlet for his internal rage, but perhaps calling him *ridiculous* was not the best way to coax his anger out of him.

I found out later from his best friend (another player on the team) that the catalyst for Scott’s outburst had been a series of arguments with his mother and her new boyfriend. Trying to push his way into Scott’s life—despite Scott’s revulsion at the idea of anyone replacing his father—the boyfriend had grown impatient with Scott’s coldness toward him. He had moved into their home, and Scott’s mother gave him the reins on discipline. Despite Scott’s obvious aversion

to their new living arrangements, his mother remained unsympathetic; in fact, she said nothing when her new stud—with a half-closed hand—struck her son about his face.

Miguel knew Scott better than anyone else; however, it was only *after* Scott had almost decapitated an opposing team's first baseman with a blindside elbow that Miguel came to me with information and sought some compassion for his friend.

"Scott's mother doesn't protect him," he revealed to me on the day of the elbow incident. Not only had Scott been thrown out of that particular game; our assistant principal, who happened to be the administrator in charge of the game that afternoon, subsequently handed Scott a three-day fighting suspension.

"Doesn't protect him?" I raised a brow.

"No," Miguel said quietly, "she lets her boyfriend beat him."

"Why didn't he tell me this?" I asked, clenching my teeth.

Miguel shrugged. "I guess he didn't think anybody cares." And then he paused, looking down. "Maybe Scott doesn't care anymore either."

The discussion with Miguel cascaded into my report to Scott's counselor about the possibility of child abuse. After gathering all the particulars, I filled out a complicated form that clarified very little: Scott lived in a home that neglected his needs—a situation where his mother's new stud sucked the marrow out of the love that had once filled Scott's life. Worse, Scott's mother clearly demonstrated that the needs of her boyfriend came before those of her son.

His loss, his pain—both physical and emotional—had muted him.

Some teenage boys are garrulous (won't stay quiet), but the vast majority of boys must be prodded with cattle irons before they squeak out their feelings or divulge their idiosyncrasies. Despite knowing that boys shut up and shut out, rather than share their inner secrets, society still contends—for inexplicable reasons—that it is *girls* who barricade their needs and problems from busy parents and distracted teachers. Sad, but through all the laughs we adults have enjoyed about the quirky language of teenagers, we still haven't found a more successful scheme for effectively communicating with our most wary, introverted adolescents.

MR. G.'S HOME-GROWN ADVICE

Several times during my teaching career I have said to myself, "I give up. I can't understand these kids; I will *never* understand them. They speak funny, intentionally look weird, and do the most baffling things! They either talk too much or they clam up and don't talk at all. They often say the very opposite of what they really mean. They have a language all their own, and just when I've begun to understand some of it, it changes."

I quit!

I haven't quit, of course. I'm a very tenacious man, and quitting my lifelong dream, working with teenagers and teaching them the skills they will need to live successful, ethical lives, doesn't figure in my plans; so I keep going, fighting my frustrations and agonizing through the whole process of living with—and understanding—teenagers.

Parents

First and foremost: While they're *young*, encourage your children to open up to you. Remind them often that there's nothing they can't tell you. Every time you scoff at them, belittle them, or ridicule their ideas or language, you are constructing barriers between you and your kids. And by the time your children have grown and become teenagers, they will have erected communication barriers of their own. It will be your duty to get through these barriers—fast—providing some damage control. Your teenagers will need to trust you, rely on you, and *talk* to you. Your own exhaustion and everyday frustrations are not excuses for becoming inert in this critical aspect of parenting. Yes, it's exhausting work, but you volunteered for the job.

Teachers

Let your students go! (No, I'm not Moses groveling at the feet of Pharaoh.) You don't have to tolerate profanities (and *should not* tolerate them), but carefully reexamine your intense focus on grammar, punctuation, and slang language. Sure, teach the proper styles for writing and speaking; and, sure, guide your students in the processes for finding their own voices. But never refuse to listen, even if they choose a form of communication you don't agree with or perform with a level of adequacy below your expectations.

Never humiliate teenagers for not saying it the "right way."

All good teachers know there is a fine line between suggesting and rejecting, and often that line is blurred. Good teachers—the ones who actually *care* about the futures of their students—work diligently to find out where that line is and how to straddle it without damaging their students' psyches.

Encourage your students to speak up, even when you know they're going to be wrong. Reward them for oral participation, especially when an exchange of heavy ideas is the order of the day. *Involvement is the key*: with their hearts and their minds and their souls. More than occasionally I have said things in class that I *knew* would infuriate my students, forcing them to respond—sometimes from sheer anger or frustration. As a teacher, you have the power to make or

break your students in this most vital of life's arenas: their willingness to express themselves.

Teenagers

If you face any of these communication obstacles, whether they result from your own noncommunicative language or from ill-spirited, narrow-minded adults, here are some pointed suggestions:

1. Love the language that *you* use. Like your teenage predecessors, your language is all your own. Enjoy! If others criticize you—and they will—or make fun of you (as *I* often do), *tough*. You won't be a teenager forever, and one of the pleasures you're going to miss later is your silly, slang-riddled language. When you're all grown up and a daddy of two kids, you will crack your children up, as you describe the way you used to talk. Remember, however, that every so often you also will have to employ a formal voice; for example, writing on a college application, "Yo, dis place's got some sick buildings! It's da'bomb," probably isn't going to get you into Princeton.
2. Speak up. Just when you're thinking you have absolutely nothing to say, nothing to offer anyone else—that everybody else will just laugh at you—these are precisely the times you need to speak up. Say something. If it's wrong, it's wrong. If it's silly, it's silly. If it's irrelevant, it's irrelevant. Part of breaking through communication barriers is being able to absorb criticism and rebound from abject embarrassment. Remember Nietzsche: "That which does not kill us makes us stronger." Good philosophy.
3. Read. Read a *lot*. Read anything! Reading will make you speak and write better; you will have more to say and many additional ways of saying it. Good word use rubs off on us. And reading itself becomes habit-forming—even a better habit than biting your fingernails or smoking weed. So...*read!*
4. Take a speech class. Some of you would rather be at ground zero of the next terrorist attack than take a speech class; the theory behind my suggestion, however, is quite simple: Instruction in public speaking consolidates language use, tears down communication barriers, and alleviates a lot of fears. My competitive speech kids could sling the slang and *get down* with the best of them, but they also knew how to stiffen their speech habits and act formal, stilted, and boring when the situation required them to do so. Taking a speech class is not a sucky idea;