

TITLE 9

by Hal Stemmler

2041

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It is recommended that you speak in “third person objective” voice, as though you were being interviewed on the evening news. You will naturally want to share special thoughts with specific loved ones, but we recommend you use the “For You Only” feature for such intimate messages.

Talk about your family.

I doubt anybody knows what kind of family they will have until it actually happens to them. At this point in life I admire, and maybe even envy a little, those families with lots of children, maybe four kids or even more. I tell myself I should have started sooner if that’s what I had in mind, but that’s the point. That wasn’t the plan because there really wasn’t a plan at all. Kids just happen. If you’re happy with how things turn out with the family, then you can say you planned it, but really, there’s just too much luck involved. Probably most couples imagine two kids, ideally a boy and a girl, but then the chips fall where they may. Did I have any kind of premonition that I would raise two girls? No, and I thank my lucky stars that things seem to have worked out for both Gwen and Audrey. Of course, Marge gets most of the credit. She was a great Mom from start to finish, and I miss her.

It’s hard to believe that both the girls are married now. I guess what I’m really saying is, it’s not easy for parents to understand that their children have become adults, with their own lives ahead of them. Gwen has a couple of kids, and Audrey isn’t too old to start up her own family with Evan. The seven years that separated them were some wild ones, and they traveled very different roads to get to where they are now. You think you learn everything with the first child, and that having the second will be so much easier thanks to the experience, but it didn’t turn out that way at all.

When I get together with some of the old gang, we talk

about how challenging it was to raise a family during such difficult times of change, but I think we flatter ourselves.

Gwen met Scott in high school and they were locked in place before Marge or I really got wind of what was going on. We weren’t all that happy about it, and we argued with Gwen when she started changing plans after high school to stay with Scott. I still find myself wishing she had gone to Santa Barbara when she got accepted to the university there, and things would be different for her now if she had. But different doesn’t necessarily mean better, and it’s possible I wouldn’t be a grandfather now, and Marge wouldn’t have met little Ernie before she passed on.

Everything was different for Audrey. She was part of a very different world than the one her older sister went through. I really didn’t understand it until the dust had settled. Gwen seemed to follow unconsciously some traditional pattern of family life, married with kids before she was twenty-two, but that pattern disappeared in those few short years. Gwen never even thought about playing a sport in high school. Hardly any girls did then, and the conventional wisdom was girl jocks were weird and somehow unnatural. Audrey played softball and loved it, plain and simple. It wasn’t just the game that appealed to her, though. What we called “the conventional wisdom” had changed. Nobody knows why something like that happens, but in just a few years the way people thought about things changed and made the old ways seem of a different time.

We have all lived through history. Thinking outside your family, look back on the historical changes you have witnessed. Which do you believe have affected you the most?

Well, we talked a lot about our “first black president” when Audrey was in high school, but that idea sounds hollow now. It suggests there would be a second, but that hasn’t happened,

any more than having our second woman president. Sure, we elected our first black president, and you could call that a change, but America was changing big time when Eisenhower was president, too, so maybe we’ve learned that presidents aren’t that important. We elect a figurehead, and that does say a lot about us as a people, but presidents aren’t really engines of change.

On my bad days, I see that so many changes we link to the Obama years weren’t really



changes at all. For starters, electing a black president, and then re-electing him, certainly didn't end racism in the U.S. People today worry about the racism in the people all around them, without realizing we surround ourselves with mirrors. To tell the truth, I can think of more historical "un-changes" than changes, situations when everybody thought huge changes were coming, but then as the years went by, we realized that very little was different from the old days. By the time they legalized gay marriage, for example, it was already pretty much a done deal, but did that keep employers or landlords from evicting, firing, or not hiring a gay person? I doubt it. Our high-tech world makes a college education more important than ever, but we walked away from public education and the cost today for the University of California means only the richest can consider it. "Obamacare" wasn't the change people hoped for, and today we still have too many families scared to death that sickness will put them out of their house and straight into poverty. Instead of focusing on healing people, we have too many medical companies maximizing their profits when people get sick. Same thing for legalizing cannabis: it wasn't the change people hoped for, and we have too many companies competing to maximize profits when people get high.

I could tell you that technology has changed how we live, but I don't think I really understand anymore where technology starts and where it leaves off. There was a time when people worried about losing privacy, but that seems quaint and funny now. I don't think anybody anymore believes there is a shred of privacy left, but the digital management industry has moved in. The only reason you, dear ones, are reading my thoughts now is the success of sites like PosthumousGlory.com.

What are your thoughts about the jobs you've had, and your career?

In a world of 'haves' and 'have-nots,' I guess I'm a 'have.' All in all, life's been pretty good, but I know damn well it isn't for an awful lot of people, and nobody seems to know what to do to change that.

If a person has an unusual talent that people will pay for, then all the equal opportunity talk goes out the window. Can you throw a baseball 100 miles an hour? If you can, it doesn't matter if you're black, white, brown, or yellow, male or female. Same goes for other unique talents, whether it's industrial design or computer engineering.

But most of us don't have any unusual talents. What we bring to the table are our connections and our experience. What I'm getting at is that deep down I know that practically anybody could have done the job that has made my career, fed my family, and left me with a comfortable life in retirement. The fact is that most of the jobs in our 'economy' don't require any discernible talent or skill. People grow into functions they didn't create, but for which a need develops. Prosperous

people like myself—the people at the top, the corporate executives and other 'management' personnel—started by getting hired at entry level, and the person doing the hiring decided they liked you more than the next person. What talent or skill was in that? Not much, but as time goes by, and when you don't piss off the wrong people, then people get used to you. Somebody has to make the decisions about who gets hired, and the time comes when that somebody is you.

If you were to run for Congress, what kinds of laws would you advocate?

If we could pass a law to make the world a better place, maybe we would. Maybe not. The past decades have not been encouraging. It bothers me that it's so hard to level the playing field for people who are left out of the good life, but people want to hang out with people like themselves, and all the laws, and all the preaching in the world, can't change that.

It seems to me there are two different kinds of laws: those that preach, and those that change things. Laws that preach do little more than point in a general direction without saying how we can get there. It's all well and good, for example, to order that women shall have equal rights with men, as the Equal Rights Amendment tried to do in the last century. But people get uncomfortable with something that vague, and in the end the ERA couldn't meet the deadline for its adoption into the constitution. In the same way, I read about a law passed almost a hundred years ago declaring a government policy that there should be full employment. That law gave no clue about how to do it, and needless to say, we've never really had full employment.

Laws that change things don't just point in a direction; they draw clear lines in the sand that must be crossed. Laws to clean the air and water included specific numbers for how much ozone can be released into the air, or how much ammonia can be released into the water. Those numbers were intended to protect what we understood was valuable, but they've changed how we think about so many other things, too. You start with a rule about air pollution, and we end up, over time, building our cities and homes in very different ways. They passed laws requiring car companies to build cars that meet specific, lower limits on emissions of poisonous chemicals into the air. The manufacturers complained it couldn't be done, but today we get around in vehicles that might never have been invented if the law hadn't set specific, measurable limits. No, the government didn't invent the cars, but the law totally transformed personal transportation.

Title 9 was a simple "change things" law, but who could have imagined how our entire social structure could change just by requiring schools to spend the same amount on sports for girls as they do for boys? It was one section of some other big piece of legislation a generation or two ago. I don't know how much effect any of the rest of that bill had, but that simple change about school spending shifted the ground under our

feet in ways scholars will study for centuries. While things were confusing in the early days, I'm convinced the country is better off for it today. There wasn't a girls' softball team at McKinley High when Gwen started there, but softball was the best part of high school for Audrey. She went to college on scholarship, and Fresno's college program probably didn't start until Title 9 became law, either. Audrey was able to make choices for herself, and she avoided getting married until she was ready and willing to do it. Thank God. "Change" laws can't tell people how to think, but the way it seems to me now, they can change habits and practices that will make the world a better place without us even knowing it at the time.

2014

Lawrence Stucker was sixteen and a sophomore at William McKinley High School when he met Audrey LaGrange in history class. It was love at first sight, and he felt entitled to it.

The freshman year English curriculum had included Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* and Lawrence felt no doubt at all that he had understood the play to its core. The language that was a stone wall to so many freshmen in high school had opened up for him, peeling back an entry way which he entered with a sense of thrill—and ownership. At the core of the story was the phenomenon of 'love at first sight.' What was happening in Romeo's mind when, after just one look at Juliet, his entire being wrapped itself around her? Lawrence Stucker understood this mystery and unconsciously prepared to have the same thing happen to him. What appealed to Lawrence was the raw power that came with Romeo's presumption: he could simply choose an object worthy of his romantic focus and 'love at first sight' would ensue as a matter of course. True, such love, by definition, must be reciprocal, but Lawrence never doubted that wishing would make it so. Romeo looked at Juliet and fell hopelessly in love with her; Juliet, after only modest prodding, threw all reservation to the wind and fell hopelessly in love with him.

Audrey LaGrange knew nothing of this. She did not realize she had been met. Each day when she entered third period, she took her seat and, for the most part, focused on the class, a focus disturbed often enough by her friends' jokes and antics. She was hardly aware of Lawrence, sitting in the next row, one seat behind. She did not know she was being studied. She was unaware of how her long, blonde brown hair shimmered with even the slightest movement of her head. She did not understand how her long, slender legs looked, wrapped in tight blue denim, fashionably frayed at the knees and upper thighs, her canvas Vans nudging impertinently under the book rack of the seat before her. It didn't occur to her that when she raised herself up from her slouch, her ass jutted against the chair back, full and glorious. How could she know, when she leaned over to talk with Gloria next to her, what hints her

loose white blouse might give about her compact breasts?

Once stung, Lawrence faced a challenge. He had not had a girlfriend before, mostly, he told himself, because he hadn't had the time. He now accepted the idea of having a girlfriend, like he accepted the idea of playing a sport, or joining the math club. He wouldn't put it on his college application, of course, but he viewed having a girlfriend as an essential entry on his resume for a successful and normal life. But he had no idea how to start.

Lawrence Stucker was the only child of parents with prominent, successful, and very separate careers. With either career, investment advisor or owner of a cosmetics company, the family would have been very well off, but squeezing both into a family unit swelled it until the fission of separation left the father living his life, the mother living hers, and Lawrence alone between the two of them. Lawrence saw no downside to this, since both parents spared no expense to keep him comfortable. One byproduct of Lawrence's protected childhood was that nobody ever introduced him to the more familiar nickname, 'Larry.' His friends from earliest childhood felt compelled to call him Lawrence, as his parents did.

Lawrence was in fifth grade and still playing baseball when he first understood his family was rich, and what that actually meant. It meant, quite simply, that he could have anything he wanted. His friend Trevor had told him about a new alloy baseball bat that was the rage among the players on his older brother's college team, but you practically needed a sponsor to buy one, they cost so much. Lawrence mentioned it during his week at his father's house and by Saturday that bat was in the trunk his dad's housekeeper hauled to the mother's house for his week with her. It would not have occurred to Lawrence to gloat, but he was puzzled because when Trevor saw the bat in Lawrence's hands at the next practice, he said nothing, and they never talked about it again.

By the time he got to high school, Lawrence understood his privilege and what he was expected to do to maintain it. He took school seriously, but he also found it easy to get good grades. Even in his sophomore year his grade point average was in the top ten for the school, and his plan included taking as many honors courses as the school offered, so when he received the expected 'A,' it would help 'bump' him above 4.0. He had already decided to attend UCLA after graduation.

Lawrence had always known his parents as separate people leading separate lives. When he stayed with either in their homes, there was never any discussion of the other parent or the separation. He didn't have the imagination to picture the romance that must have brought them together before he was born, and he had no memory of their life as a family of three. As he grew older, however, he pieced together a picture of how his parents had split up. They weren't actually divorced, but he knew others his age whose parents were, and who constantly bad-mouthed their ex. That was ugly, but offered

answers to the question, “why had they broken up?” His own parents were way too sophisticated for that. They didn’t waste time saying bad things, or showing such bad taste, in his presence. Instead, they engaged in an undeclared competition for his favor, triangulating through their son to outmaneuver their spouse in the race for long-term memories. Among the gratuities lavished upon him were frequent one-on-one trips, and it was on these travels that he picked up some clues. As a younger child, his parents frequently took him on expensive trips to places like Charleston, Mexico, San Diego, or New York City, sometimes to visit family members, but mostly to stay in nice hotels. The trips became less frequent in his teen years, but more revealing as his father, and then his mother, began to relate to him more as an adult.

His father took him to Hawaii for a week when he was in eighth grade. It was the first time he saw his father in the company of other women, and it was confusing to consider that his father had a guest in his hotel room. It was also the first time he was around his father when he was under the influence of alcohol. He was exposed to a vanity he didn’t understand. His father was fairly tall and solidly built, and now Lawrence learned he had been in some violent fights. He almost bragged about a man he had beaten in a fight in college, and he spoke more vaguely about some confrontation in a bar not so long ago. The common thread was the involvement of women, who seemed at times to require rescue, and at other times, discipline. This stranger who was his father leaned across the table in a restaurant in Waikiki, his face reddened and his eyes a bit dulled with drink. Suddenly and for the first time, he saw it as his duty to impart life wisdom to his son. Lawrence couldn’t follow most of the lecture, but he could not erase from his memory what came at the end.

“Women are always looking for direction, son. They may not act grateful, but they take it when they can get it.” He was staring with sudden intensity at Lawrence. “It takes a strong man to keep a woman in her place.”

“But what about Mom?” Lawrence blurted without thinking.

His father fell back in his chair. He spoke calmly, almost resignedly.

“What about her? She’s in her place.”

Late in his sophomore year, Lawrence’s parents gave him a car to celebrate his driver’s license. Two cars, actually. When Lawrence was at his mom’s house right after he passed his behind-the-wheel test, she took him out to dinner. After the meal, she told him to drive her Honda home, and on the way she told him she had already put the car in his name. It was not a surprise gift, by any means, but Lawrence was pleased to have the car, and thanked her. But when he drove it to his father’s house in next week, his father blushed with anger seeing Lawrence behind wheel without his mom in the car.

“I’m not going to have my son driving around town in some hand-me-down,” he muttered. “She should know by now she

needs to talk to me first about something this important.” By the end of the week the Honda had disappeared and Lawrence was driving a new Lexus off the car lot. When his mother saw the new car the next week, she acted like she didn’t notice, and she never said a word about what had gone down between her and her husband. Lawrence saw that this was how things worked. His father called the shots, and his mother had to go along.

Both parents were keenly aware of how time was speeding up as their only child went through high school. It was getting harder and harder to have a conversation with Lawrence, partly because they were all so busy, but also because he was so successful in high school. It was as though Lawrence’s success forestalled any meddling on their part in his affairs. Good grades insulated him from genuine contact with his parents, so each feuding parent tried in their own way to buy his attention and allegiance.

Challenge number one: Lawrence and Audrey did not hang out with the same crowd. Lawrence had three or four friends from his honors classes who also played with him on the tennis team. Hanging out at lunch pretty much defined them as a group. Audrey was the softball team’s star center fielder. The entire team was her social group, and they all lit up when they found themselves together in any class. They dominated their corner of campus during lunch, and practices after school were an extended party that stretched through almost the entire school year. Somehow, Lawrence had to break through the social wall that made Audrey seem a distant prize. Lawrence could not possibly talk to his parents about his infatuation with Audrey LaGrange. He knew his parents were acquainted with the LaGranges, but that was no help. In fact, he couldn’t talk to anybody about it. Somehow, he had to break through to get her to acknowledge him at all, and that was proving difficult. The fact that Audrey was always surrounded by a swarm of teammates was starting to bother him. That they seemed always to be joking around and having fun didn’t help.

The softball team players were always on their phones, but Lawrence was wary about pushing himself into that realm uninvited. He checked Facebook but saw Audrey hadn’t posted in quite a while, and he was too concerned about appearing creepy to do a friend request. They must all be on Snapchat, or maybe Twitter, or maybe something he didn’t even know about yet.

Lawrence asked around, and poked around on line, and he came up with a plan. He found a random clip on YouTube of a high school softball pitcher. He thought about using some effects on it, maybe superimposing Audrey’s head on a player in the video, but he decided that would be over the top for now. So he got on Vine, posted just five seconds of the pitcher’s motion, and messaged Audrey with a note, “Shout out to McKinley High softball!” He was too nervous to wait

for a response on line, but the next morning saw that there was none. When he got to history class that morning, Audrey walked by his seat and gave him a puzzled smile before sitting down. She turned around to look at him.

“I didn’t think you guys even knew we had a softball team at this school,” she said with a smirk.

“Oh, yeah—you know, go Panthers!” Lawrence didn’t know what else to say, but he felt some relief at having made contact. Audrey’s grey-blue eyes twinkled and her cheeks were seriously cute when she smiled, although something about the set of her lips made him wonder if she was making fun of him. He noticed for the first time the dainty freckles that sprinkled the bridge of her perfect nose.

Summer came and went with Lawrence working in the office of one of his father’s business associates. He only saw Audrey once in eight weeks, at a summer party at the community pool. He made the effort to talk to her, but she was there with several of her friends from the softball team. He was unable to move the conversation to where he could ask her out, and he resigned himself to waiting for school to start in August, when he knew he would see her daily.

Junior year was fun. Lawrence really had to focus to keep his classes under control, but he was feeling successful. His GPA was where he wanted it to be. The dances and other parties offered regular opportunities to hang out with lots of new people, including other girls he liked. Still, as spring began to warm the sap in the trees and the blood of upper class members, Audrey remained the focus of Lawrence’s plans. He was going to ask her to prom, he was going to do it right, and he wouldn’t take no for an answer.

He Googled ‘promvites’ and came up with a plan. He bought a very large gift box at Macy’s and placed five helium balloons inside, each with a large letter painted on it, which together spelled out ‘PROM?’ The long strings attached to the bottom of each balloon were taped together at the bottom of the box and a large card was taped to the strings about a foot below the balloons. The card had large type saying, “I wanted to rise to the occasion to ask you to prom!”

On a Thursday in early April, Lawrence drove to Audrey’s house after dinner. Audrey answered the front door. Lawrence sensed a flash of distress on her face when she first saw him, but she quickly put on a soft smile. Her eyes, he saw, were laughing. He handed her the big box, and although it was not at all heavy, he told her to place it on the step. She peeled back the silver foil on the top and unfolded the lid. The balloons popped up jubilantly. Lawrence thought it worked quite well. One of the balloons was twisted a bit, but that wasn’t a big deal.

“Oh.”

It was only one, breathy, hollow syllable, but Lawrence could hear he had made a mistake. Audrey had read the note and he watched her face as she looked for words to say. She glanced past his shoulder at the Lexus at the curb, and she let

a brief laugh slip out. Now the smile on her face had become a mask with no person behind it. They shared a few sentences, but Lawrence had gone deaf. The balloons bobbed mockingly in the breeze. Lawrence felt a ripple of panic when he realized he had no idea what to do next. His hands swatted at the balloons, but he knew he couldn’t get them back into the box with it lying on the ground. He sure couldn’t leave them there for everyone to see. His head pivoted on frozen shoulders as he quickly looked around to see if anyone else was on the street. He couldn’t remember if he had said goodbye as he reached down to grab the box flap, and then he realized he said it twice. He opened the passenger side door and flipped the seat forward. The flimsy box crumpled as he shoved it into the back, but the balloons were much more reluctant passengers. He felt his face grow heated as he struggled to get all five inside before closing the door. One didn’t manage to escape the slamming door’s edge and a loud pop bounced off the house fronts. Lawrence saw Audrey’s face still standing on her step as he drove away.

When he got home, Lawrence realized he couldn’t just leave the box and balloons in the car on the street. He took the pen knife he kept in the glove box and stabbed the other four balloons and stuffed the flaccid remains and strings into the box, crumpled it into a small mound and put it in the garbage. He felt cheated. He had taken all the steps he saw others take in preparing their invitations, and he couldn’t think of any other cases at school where the girl said no. He felt anger grow. Elaborate prom invitations were a sure thing! Something wasn’t right, and he struggled to find a way to deal with the embarrassment that made his ears burn.

He walked to school the next morning. Sometimes he drove, but it really wasn’t very far and parking was a hassle if you waited too long and arrived close to the tardy bell. He tried to pretend nothing had happened. It wouldn’t be that difficult to avoid Audrey, since she had managed to get by without any honors courses this year, and their schedules did not overlap at all. By the end of the day, he couldn’t resist the temptation to walk through the ball fields behind the school and exit the grounds through the tall cyclone fence dividing the athletics area from the back yards of the houses bordering the grounds. He waited awhile after school in the library to make sure he could walk home alone.

All the spring sports teams were spread over the acres of green grass. Members of the track team dispersed in their random, individual events, and the women’s soccer teams ran around the fields way back in the far corner. The men’s baseball teams were practicing on the fields to the left of the path to the gate, and the women’s softball teams were practicing on the fields to the right. A light dust rose from the raked dirt infield as a warm breeze moved plump white clouds across the brilliant blue spring sky.

Lawrence didn’t intend to hang around, but when he got to the low metal bleachers behind the backstop, he leaned his

butt against it, took his pack off his shoulder for a moment, and looked around. His eye caught sight of two girls in softball uniforms with dark blue pants and white jerseys, walking leisurely from the gate back to the field. They were holding hands.

The two girls looked and walked like twins. Both were slender and moved with a lithe stride. One had black, shoulder-length hair, and the other was slightly taller, with blondish-brown hair. The taller girl was Audrey LaGrange. Lawrence rocked forward onto his feet, but didn't move.

He didn't want to stare, but he knew he was staring. The girls didn't seem to notice anything around them. They looked mostly at each other, sometimes talking, sometimes smiling, in no hurry at all. When they got to the bleachers they were still in their own bubble. Nobody else from the team noticed them or called out in their direction. The tableau was as normal as any sunny spring afternoon on a ball field, except for the tempest that swirled around Lawrence Stucker.

In slow motion, Audrey turned to Lawrence and looked at him with an almost boyish grin. She didn't say anything. It was not a mean smile. It was a preoccupied smile. It was a simple, happy smile. He suddenly understood she wasn't smiling at him; she wasn't even aware of his presence. Audrey was not just holding Megan Bowler's hand; their forearms were intertwined, and Megan's toe was idly scooping dust into little mounds. He tried not to stare at their bare forearms, each tanned and each with fine, delicate hairs, fair on one arm, dark on the other, looking like they had been delicately, lovingly stroked into a gentle mat. While he stared, he saw goosebumps appear on the lovers' arms, and to his mortification, he felt his own arms break into goosebumps. Despite the light wind that fluttered the ends of the girls' hair, he was aware of a scent, an aura, a pheromonic cloud that drew the two girls together, drenching them in a shared bath of sensual attraction. He looked at the path and the gate at the end of the field. They had gone to one of their houses after school to be alone together. An unspeakable thought crushed into his head. They had been having sex—two girls and an afternoon delight!

For a moment, Lawrence saw himself striking each of those whores to the ground with his clenched right fist, first Megan and then Audrey. They had to be put in their place! He could almost feel his leg kicking them as they twitched in the dust. That bloody image faded slowly as he felt he was going to be sick. He placed his hand on the cold aluminum bleacher to keep from stumbling and he realized in a panic that he had been stricken with a silent invisibility. He was surrounded by people in a parallel universe who were joking, chewing, talking on their phones, clapping, all completely oblivious to his presence. He had to get home. His movements came slowly. He turned to his right and looped the strap of his pack over his shoulder. The first couple of steps were the hardest, but then he steadied himself and forced himself to walk slowly

along the path. Would he pass the house? Would he be able to tell which one it was?

The surges of victimhood, the physical reaction to the injustice he had suffered, but mostly his anger kept Lawrence home from school the next day. It wasn't right. It wasn't right! He couldn't stop his thoughts from picturing the two girls together, from envisioning in vivid detail the things they had done to each other. That was all bad enough, but he couldn't say why it mattered to him. How many of his friends knew he had gone to Audrey's house to invite her to prom? How many knew Audrey was a lesbian? Had he really invited a lesbian to the prom? It was wrong for girls to behave like that. It was wrong to tolerate girls fucking each other, or whatever it was they were doing.

It was just wrong! His anger spun around and around inside his mind. What would his father do in a situation like this? Did Audrey's parents know? Were they aware their daughter had this problem? It took awhile to come around to it, but Lawrence eventually saw what the right course of action would be. He would talk to her parents. He would talk to the man of the house, Audrey's dad. Yes, that was it. That seemed more manageable. He owed it to Mr. LaGrange to inform him of what was happening to his daughter. He should talk to him before Audrey's problem got worse, or got to a point where nothing could be done. He decided to wait until Tuesday afternoon, when the softball team had an away game and when Mr. LaGrange would be home from work.

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What was the time when you faced your greatest challenges?

I measure how the world has changed by the difference in how our two daughters grew up just seven years apart. I've heard people say that a society can be judged by how it treats its children, and that is certainly true. I think it's even more important how a society allows its children to enter the world of adulthood. I'm sure I won't be the first person to write about their children's teenage years.

There are times when parents are raising teenagers that they wonder just how much crazier things can get. There's that period when you fear what else teenagers can do to scare the devil out of their parents. I think, with the girls, the hell years began around the age of twelve, when they went to junior high school and all those hormones started to kick in.

It was harder for Gwen, partly because we didn't have any experience raising a daughter, and partly because her world seemed so different than what Marge or I lived through when we were that age. Our era looks now like it was more restrained, although I know enough not to trust my memory. I think there were more rules, and we just didn't have the craziness of cell phones and the internet. It was Gwen's personality, too. Yes, dear one, there was an insecurity you wrestled with that seemed to make you in a hurry to grow up.

You're grown up now, so maybe it doesn't seem that way to you when you look back.

Marge and I weren't prepared for the end of Gwen's childhood. She was our adorable first born, and we felt so helpless when she started taking boys seriously and going out on dates when we finally allowed it in her freshman year. There's nothing wrong with dates; they're normal, but we had less and less idea what was happening on those dates, and we knew less and less about the boys she went out with. Long before graduation Gwen had worked through her needs and had selected Scott, certainly without our help or advice.

Our first taste of hell came the first time Gwen crashed the car. It was bad, and that was painful for us, as well as for her. But Marge and I talked about how much worse it could have been. We didn't stop there; we talked about how much worse it could be the next time, because we so feared there would be a next time. She was only sixteen. She was drinking by then, because that made her feel grown up, and that was what the boys she went out with expected of her. It was almost a good thing when she got busted for being drunk at that school dance in her junior year. We left her alone for those five days at home, but she seemed more mature after that. Maybe she just learned how to keep to herself more, but it seemed like trouble left her alone during her last year at home.

Trouble hardly showed up at all when it was Audrey's turn. There are probably lots of little reasons for the difference, but the main one was that Audrey was into her sports. It was so much a part of her identity, and it seemed to save her from so much of the insecurity that bothered her older sister. I've always said the best you can hope for from the high school experience is that a child finds something they are good at. It would have been great if Audrey or Gwen had become great writers, or outstanding actors in the school productions, or brilliant in math. But Audrey had softball. She loved to play, she was good at it, and she was the lucky one.

They say girls are much more difficult than boys as teenagers, and I think that's because boys have much more power to make girls miserable than the other way around. In my day, I could agree that the choices teenage boys faced came with lower stakes, and they got cut more slack in a patriarchal society. I don't think it's that way anymore, but I don't really know.

I wouldn't trade places with Lawrence Stucker's parents, that's for sure. That day he came to the house to talk to me about Audrey was as big a parenting challenge as most of the crises I endured with my own children. He had me wondering

for a few minutes that I might have to call an ambulance. Marge said it was all she could do not to come downstairs into the parlor when she heard him screaming F-bombs so loud they rang through the entire house. He was a troubled young man, that's for certain. Having divorced parents never makes it easy, I suppose. I heard he's living in L.A. now, and has some kind of consulting business. He felt it was important that I know that Audrey was a lesbian, as though there was anything I could do about it if she was. I would have laughed out loud if I hadn't been afraid of what he might have done. I'm not sure how he came up with his lesbian theory. Whatever else was going on in high school, Audrey's living with a man today who has done very well with his own high-end cabinet business, and if Evan has any problems with Audrey's sexual preferences, he doesn't seem to let on.

What I'm really glad about is that Audrey had the strength to steer clear of a guy like Stuckey. All I could see in him was sexism, insecurity, and the kind of presumption that comes with being a rich kid and having nobody around you to tell you "no." Men like that have made plenty of women miserable.

I said before that you can't pass a law that tells people how to think. You can, however, change some of the rules, and Audrey's experience with softball made me a big fan of equal sports funding for boys and girls. If one of the unintended consequences of high school sports is that a generation of girls will have their first sexual experience with other girls instead of boys, so be it. Worse things can happen.

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*And on the pedestal these words appear:
'My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!'*

*Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.*

Percy Bysshe Shelley, 1817