

Should the Stupidity of Youth Be Used Against Us?

All human beings of sound mind are walking, breathing time machines. With a flip of the switch—and often, under a stimulus like Proust's madeleine biscuit, that switch sometimes flips itself—we can soar via our memories across the decades, sitting again in that fourth grade classroom behind a boy nicknamed Spike, dancing with Debbie at our senior prom, tasting our first beer in a New York café while on spring break.

Today let's turn back the dial of years. Flip that switch and shoot across time and space to revisit that sixteen-year-old whose face you used to see in your mirror.

Are you there? You're reading these words at breakfast or in your work cubicle, sipping your coffee, but I hope you've paused to recollect those days when you were first driving a car, when an A in biology class seemed the most important thing in the world, when the self you have become was as yet unimaginable to the self you were.

Now ask your sixteen-year-old self some questions.

Did you ever cheat on a test?

Did you ever avoid a sticky situation by lying to your parents, teachers, or friends?

Did you fail a friend in a crisis?

Did you bully a classmate or a younger sibling?

Did you get drunk on beer or smoke dope?

Did you hang out with friends who led you down disastrous pathways?

Did you behave inappropriately to a member of the opposite sex?

Did you do something that in hindsight was incredibly boorish, stupid, or dangerous?

Did you ever break someone's heart?

Now ask the same questions of your twenty-year-old self. Pause a moment and reflect on the dumb things you did at that age.

Okay. Push the throttle of your time machine forward and zip back to your desk and your coffee.

Most young people are focused on themselves, lack judgment, and display a predilection for disaster. Unless you were a saint in high school and college, you made some awful decisions. You hurt some people. Many times, you hurt yourself. In some cases, you deliberately chose the wrong path.

There's a name for these reckless missteps. It's called growing up.

Recently, we have suffered a barrage of news regarding Christine Ford's allegations of sexual assault against Brett Kavanaugh, nominee for the Supreme Court. The incident supposedly occurred thirty-odd years ago, when both were in high school. Mr. Kavanaugh has vigorously denied these allegations. Others whom Ford claims were present during this incident have denied her allegations. Nor did Ford tell anyone that Kavanaugh was her assailant until he received the nomination.

The evidence against Brett Kavanaugh is not even faintly damning. Those who know him regard Kavanaugh as a loving husband and father, a brilliant jurist, and an asset to his community. Women who were his friends in high school and college, or who have worked with him since then, have written to the Senate defending him and supporting his nomination.

While I am one of those who disbelieve Ford, let's assume for a moment the incident she describes took place. Let's assume an inebriated seventeen-year-old Kavanaugh flung the fifteen-year-old Ford onto a bed, groped her, and cut off her screams by covering her mouth with his hand. A friend, another drunken male, jumped on the two of them, laughing, and knocked them all to the floor. At that point, Ford claims, she ran to a bathroom and locked the door.

My question is this: At what age do the stupid mistakes and transgressions of youth cease to haunt our present?

Should the six-year-old expelled from school for drawing a picture of a rifle be prevented forever from seeking a political office?

Should the twelve-year-old caught cheating on her math exam be banned from applying to medical school?

Should the sixteen-year-old who drives recklessly, loses control of the car, and kills his sister be an outcast for life from the public square?

By the standards applied to Kavanaugh, and given the misdeeds of our own youth, I doubt whether most of us could be elected to city council, much less nominated to the Supreme Court.

In "My Heart Leaps Up," Wordsworth famously wrote, "The child is father to the man."

Absolutely.

But that child as father—or mother—is much more than some singular act of ignorance or wanton stupidity.

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