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*We dedicate this book to
all the teenagers who sent us
their courageous stories
and their heartfelt
thank-yous.*

Contents

[Introduction](#)

[Experience Is a Teacher](#) *Julia Travis*

[Why Rion Should Live](#) *Sarah Barnett*

[My Best Friend](#) *Lisa Rothbard*

[Healing With Love](#) *Cecil Wood*

[Ghost Mother](#) *Michele Bender*

[Terri Jackson](#) *Sydney Fox*

[A Name in the Sand](#) *Elizabeth Stumbo*

[Inner Sustenance](#) *Michelle Wallace Campanelli*

[Center Stage](#) *Jane Denitz Smith*

[Finding a Vision](#) *Talina Sessler-Barker*

[Who Is Jack Canfield?](#)

[Who Is Mark Victor Hansen?](#)

[Who Is Kimberly Kirberger?](#)

[Contributors](#)

Introduction

The Faces of Our Youth

Many older people seem to take an unmerited pride in the mere fact they are adults.

When youth comes crashing in on them with enthusiasm and ideals, they put on their most patronizing smiles and send them out with what they call their blessings.

But you and I know that they have not given their blessings but a cold shower.

They pat the young man or young woman on the back and say:

“You’re young. Enjoy your enthusiasm and your ideals while you can. For when you grow up and grow out into the world you’ll see how foolish your ideas actually were.”

And, the trouble is, young people do grow up and grow away from their ideals.

And that is one reason why the world into which they go gets better so slowly.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt
32nd President of The United States of America

Experience Is a Teacher

The true test of character is not how much we know how to do, but how we behave when we don't know what to do.

John Holt

I was shaking when I heard the car pull into the driveway. I blamed it on the chill in my house, although most likely it was because of my uncontrollable nerves. When I opened the door, Becca was standing on my porch with a smile plastered on her face.

“Hey,” she said. As she stepped inside the doorway, the guys behind her became visible. “Oh, ya,” she added. “This is Dan, Josh and Kevin.”

“Hi,” I said, and they replied the same in unison. They looked kind of like deer in headlights, standing outside the door, hands jammed in pockets, mouths half-open. As Becca made her way into the house, the guys followed her, and I felt awkwardly lost, unsure of what to say. To avoid forced conversation, I took the opportunity to jot a note to my mom, explaining where I was going.

Eventually, we made it out of the house, and I found myself in the back seat of a navy-blue truck, wedged between Josh and Kevin, two older guys from a different school. Becca was chattering away in the passenger seat, changing the radio station and singing along. My legs began to shake, a sure indicator of my nervousness, and I had to put my hands on my thighs to steady them. We soon reached the restaurant, and I was thankful for the chance to get out of the truck.

Dan was toying with the miniature coffee creamers at the end of the table. “I don't trust these,” he announced. “They've probably been sitting here since 1982.”

At the opposite end of the table, next to Kevin, I giggled, probably for the eighth time since we'd sat down. I wanted to smack myself. Between my legs shaking and my ridiculous giggling, my immature nervous habits were driving me crazy, and I prayed that nobody else noticed.

Suddenly, Becca stood up. "I have to call my mom. Dan, come with me."

"Um, I'll come, too," I said. Feeling the need to elaborate, I continued, "I have to call my mom, too." I felt stupid following Becca and Dan out to the lobby, like a girl in elementary school who can't go anywhere without her best friend.

As we waited while Becca called her mom, Dan nudged me and said, "So, what do you think of Josh and Kevin?"

"Josh is pretty cute," I said, figuring that honesty was the best way to go.

"Not Kevin?" Dan's eyes sparkled, and I knew what Becca had been talking about when she said how wonderful he was.

"No . . ." I looked out the window. "But don't tell him that I said that."

"I won't." Of course he wouldn't. What did I think this was, elementary school? I felt like a child in a world of adults, unsure how to act or what to say.

"Josh thinks you're really hot," Dan continued.

His statement immediately grabbed my attention. "Oh, really?" I was flattered.

Becca hung up the phone and caught the end of our conversation, saying excitedly, "You have to sit by him when we go back to the table!"

"No," I protested. "That'll look dumb."

"No it won't," she insisted, and Dan agreed.

"Yeah, we'll just move stuff around or whatever." It was obvious that this was an argument I was not going to win.

When we returned to the table and assumed our new seats, Josh didn't say anything. I wondered if he had figured out our juvenile plan, and then I wondered if he even cared. But I quickly tried to brush the thoughts out of my head and proceeded to giggle at everything Dan said.

Next we went to the movies. Without Becca next to me in the theater, I felt completely defenseless. I gripped my knees for support, angry at myself for being nervous. Why couldn't I have more self-confidence and be as charming as other girls are? I leaned my head back against the headrest, watching Dan and Becca out of the corner of my eye. No contact yet, I noted. I didn't know what to do with my hands, and it seemed like they took on a life of their own as they repetitiously roamed from my knees to my thighs and eventually gripped the edge of my purse.

I felt a nudge on my right arm. I looked over at Dan and watched as he mouthed the words, "Make a move." He then grinned at me and raised his eyebrows in Josh's direction.

"No!" I whispered emphatically.

"Why not?" he replied with a kind of urgency.

I half-shrugged my shoulders. "I don't know." How could I explain to him the way my mind works? I could never "make a move" on anyone; I didn't have the nerve. My fear of rejection was too intense. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw that Becca was leaning on Dan's shoulder, and his hand was resting on her knee. I sank farther into my seat.

On the way home from the movies, Becca asked Dan if he had a piece of paper. I knew immediately what she was doing and wanted to object, but couldn't. When she handed me Josh's number on a torn piece of paper, I didn't even look at it. I just played with it between my fingers, bending the edges and running it along the folds of my jeans. Josh's reaction to the piece of paper in his hand was similar.

We pulled into my driveway, and I thought that I was finally safe at home as I said good-bye to everyone and sauntered up to my porch. But as I turned around to give a final wave good-bye, I found Josh standing on the lawn.

“Hey,” he said, in a way only older guys can. “When are you going to be home tomorrow?”

“Probably all day,” I managed and immediately thought of how dumb I sounded.

“Okay, then. I’ll, um, call you around one.”

I flashed a slight smile. “Okay. Bye!” I stepped inside my house, allowing myself to breathe only when I had closed the door and was safe inside.

I washed my face, wondering if he would think that I was “really hot” without makeup. As I curled up in bed, the phrase “If only I had . . .” crossed my mind so many times that I became exhausted. But then I remembered that experience, even if awkward and uncomfortable, or in the form of a guy named Josh, is always a teacher. With that, I gradually fell asleep, knowing tomorrow was a new day, and I could rest assured there would be more lessons to learn.

Julia Travis

Why Rion Should Live

Believe that life is worth living and your belief will help create the fact.

William James

High school didn't frighten me. Oh sure, the endless halls and hundreds of classrooms were overwhelming, but I took it in with all the pleasure of starting a new adventure. My freshman year was full of possibilities and new people. With a class of nearly two thousand newcomers, you just couldn't go wrong. So I, still possessing the innocence of a child concealed in a touch of mascara and lipstick, set out to meet them all.

Spanish One introduced me to Rion. By the student definition, he was a "freak:" the black jeans, the well-worn Metallica shirts, the wallet chains, the works. But his unique personality and family troubles drew me to him. Not a crush, more of a curiosity. He was fun to talk to, and where interrupted whispering sessions left off, hours of phone conversations picked up.

During one of these evening conversations, "it," as we like to address the incident, unfolded. We were discussing the spectacular height of Ms. Canaple's over-styled bangs when I heard Rion's dad yelling in the background. "Hold on," Rion muttered before a question could be asked. I could tell that he was trying to muffle the receiver, but you could still hear the horror as if his room were a dungeon, maximizing the bellows. Then the line went dead.

Shaking, I listened to the flatline of the phone for a minute before gently placing it in its cradle, too scared to call back for fear of what I might hear. I had grown up in an ideal family setting: a mom and a dad and an older