

KIDS TODAY

By David A. Watson, Ph.D.

It is still the cool of the morning as I sit on a terrace along the beautiful Riverwalk in San Antonio. I listen to the sounds around me, and am struck by the contrast between the noises of a city going about its morning business above me on Congress Street and the chattering of the birds in the trees around me. Such a soothing environment, yet my mind is far away; I'm thinking about the jumble of activity likely occurring at this very moment at my home in Houston. Spelling lists being spelled, last minute clarinet scales being run, the occasional cry over spilled milk ("...there goes the last of that gallon"). Just the usual, but I surely miss it when I'm not there. Only yesterday, my daughter phoned me in a meeting here to say that she had passed her driving test. She was excited, and I was happy for her (though I do dread the insurance premiums I know are headed my way). I tell her often what a great kid she is, and she says "You know, Dad, most teenagers really are good people—it's only a few that spoil it for the rest of us." I believe she's got a point.

Earlier this month, I spent eight days at Clemson University in South Carolina grading essays written by High School students as part of the Educational Testing Service's Advanced Placement Examination in Biology. More than 300 of us lived and worked on campus as AP Readers, with our care and feeding largely the responsibility of university students employed for the summer by Clemson. All in their late teens and early twenties, these youngsters were without exception friendly, polite, and very attentive to our comfort (although they did keep calling me sir). Even the students on campus for summer classes (a group I half-expected would be ungracious) were all

helpful and kind when I asked for directions across campus, or for assistance in the all-night computer lab. I especially enjoyed the creative spellings I encountered in some of the essays, as well as the new words and phrases I picked up. Did you know, for example, that "...light is more prevalent during the day, and quite sparse at night"? One young man wrote that he was anxious to do well on the test because he wanted to go off to "colledge". Another told me she took the Biology exam because her teacher made her, but that her true love was France and all things French. Now that the exam was done she was off for the summer to that wonderful land; "merci & bon voyage," she penned.

Yes, I know that kids experiment with things they should not, and that sometimes it goes badly wrong. The statistics are sobering, for example, with regard to alcohol abuse on college campuses. At some schools more than 40 % of kids admit to binge-drinking regularly; this still means, however, that the great majority do not. My father asked me while visiting our family recently why teenaged guys freshly behind the wheel of an automobile seem always compelled to drive too fast (as they were that day in our neighborhood). Rather than answer directly, I gently reminded him of the story he so often told my brothers and I when we were brand new drivers (and he was paying the insurance bills). It was the sad tale of a young man home on leave from the U.S. Army in the mid 1950's who scored himself a truly outstanding fine (almost his whole month's pay as an enlisted man) for driving through town at an astounding speed. It turns out that my future father was on his way to see his girl, that is to say my mother. Live and learn, Dad always said.

My daughter is correct, I think. Most kids are good kids, because most of us are at least pretty good parents. South Carolina must have some decent ones, judging from

the fine young gentlemen and ladies I encountered at Clemson. I wish my (not so) little girl were here with me right now so I could tell her, in this lovely place, just how proud of her I am. I'll remind her the next time she calls my cell phone (I shouldn't have to wait too long). Don't forget to tell your teen you are proud of him or her for making good choices and being a good kid. It's never been more true than in this society that youth will be served...but that's okay with me, because I believe we're in good hands.