

## A Salute to the Youth

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If you are a teenager, by many, you are envied. Do you know how many times I wished I could turn back the hands of time, to revisit and reconstruct the follies of my youth?

If monetary value could be placed on the exact number, then... well, as the common saying goes: I would be rich.

In your teens is where it all starts. When an invisible fork is permanently paved in the road before you and you can either go left or right. This forked road will always be there and the decisions you will have to make will be many. Peer pressure is real; everyone is part of some sort of pack but what lacks is an individualist attitude. Oftentimes, the choices we make are dictated by those around us, whether in our pack or otherwise.

To be young and have an able body and mind is a blessing. To think for yourself is life's greatest gift. As a person in possession of an independent mind state you are ultimately able to forge your own destiny. That is, by finding the right influences and not being intimidated by what others think of you. Simply put, to be ourselves is liberating, caring what others think, is a hinderance.

I smoked at times because others were doing it; or, I thought they would think I was a square for not doing so. It was the same with drinking as well as sex. I dressed and carried myself a certain way thinking that I was the current personification of cool. To keep up this attitude, I began to act careless and skip school. Sometimes being cool isn't cool.

The dropout rate among minorities in many areas of the U.S. is upwards of 50%. At the turn of the millennium, at 16, I was part of that statistic. When I think back on those times, I think back on all of the missed fun. The school games, the homecomings, Sadie Hawkins dances, and prom. But most importantly, I missed the chance to walk across the stage in front of proud loved ones and throw my cap in the air with cherished friends. Having a GED is okay; but, it sucks compared to the missed memories and immediate opportunities that come with a high school diploma. Even worse is receiving a GED at the age of 23 while sitting in a maximum security prison.

Yes, dropping out of high school was a bad decision. A decision that helped seal my fate and solidify the direction I wound up going in. We all know that one bad decision leads to another somewhere down the line. And trust me, 75% of the guys in prison don't have a high school diploma.

Here's the thing:

1. Think for yourself and meditate on what you want for yourself and your future.
2. Take heed of those in positions you don't want to wind up in.
3. Put a plan in motion and never give up in the event of a struggle. A struggle is beautiful when you endure to the end result.
4. Never forget the first three, and know that your overall outcome depends on the decisions you make today.