



Eric, Tim and
Tommy Hollenbach

Cutting corners, playing the angles: the new American standard?

"We choose to go to the moon. We choose to go to the moon in this decade and do the other things, not because they are easy, but because they are hard. . . ."

John F. Kennedy, September 12, 1962

By Tim Hollenbach

My sons are close in age — Eric is 17, Tommy, 16 — but like many siblings, they are very different.

Eric is 6 feet 4 inches, red-haired, an honors student and a member of the prestigious school choir, and he takes school very seriously. He's rarely late for class and never has been sent to a principal's office.

Tommy is about 5 feet 9 inches with sandy blond hair. He's an average student whose only extracurricular activity is baseball. He considers school something of a hindrance to his social life. He has arrived late at school 12 times so far this year and is on a first-name basis with the principal's secretary.

They're both great kids, but I'm a father and I worry about their futures. And I worry about one a little more than the other.

This concern intensified the other night when my sons included me in a high-school-related discussion. Being included made me smile; both have attained the age at which Dad's opinion

officially is irrelevant.

The discussion concerned Eric having been assigned to read William Faulkner's novel "The Sound and the Fury" for his honors literature class. What follows is an unofficial transcript of the conversation:

Eric: "Man, I've been assigned Faulkner for lit. I hear he's a tough read."

Dad: "Yeah, he is. But in American lit, you're going to have to read Faulkner."

Tommy: "There's no such thing as a tough read. It's all English. Anyway, just go to Cliffsnotes.com. That's what I do. It works every time."

Dad: "That's why you get Cs and Eric gets As. That's why Eric will make the money, live in the big house and get the pretty girl."

Tommy: "Is that what you did? Read the book instead of the Cliffs notes? Turned out real good for you didn't it?"

Dad: "Don't be smart."

Eric: "What is Cliffsnotes.com?"

Heartwarming, isn't it? That's why I worry.

Because in the United States of 2007, the truth is, Tommy's right. Shortcuts like Cliffsnotes.com work. And it starts at the top.

Evidence doesn't point to WMDs in Iraq? Go in anyway; we'll find something. Army enlists down? Just extend the tours of the soldiers on active duty.

Not to pick on the president; we're all guilty.

Too hard to exercise and lose weight? Liposuction or stomach stapling is

the answer. Can't pay your credit card bills? Bankruptcy used to work. Can't get along with your spouse? Divorce. Job too hard? Unemployment insurance and a phony workers' comp claim could keep the money coming in; call a lawyer.

Don't write a television script; tape a reality show. Forget about cooking; everybody likes fast food. Don't write a letter to Mom; text message her cell phone. Change your own oil? Are you nuts? Jiffy Lube. Cut your own grass? You kidding me? That's why we have illegal immigrants! Don't play sports; play Xbox. Serious relationship? Nah, free porn on the Internet.

I'm not worried about Tommy. He knows how the game is played today. He's the one who'll make the big money, live in the nice house and get the pretty girl. He's entitled. He'll figure out how to get somebody else to do the heavy lifting.

Eric's the one I'm worried about. With his work ethic and attitude, he'll have a difficult time getting ahead these days. He is way behind the times. He still thinks hard work and due diligence are how you succeed. Eric hasn't figured out the shortcuts, the new American way.

Tommy needs to teach his brother a thing or two. He needs to remind Eric that we're not exactly going to the moon these days.

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