



THE Escape Adulthood MANIFESTO

“Grown-ups never understand anything for themselves, and it is tiresome for children to be always and forever explaining things to them.” — Antoine de Saint-Exupery

by Jason Kotecki

Remember childhood?

Remember when meetings were held under a tent made of couch cushions and blankets, and candy was worth more than any mutual fund? If you think really hard, I bet you can. When we were kids, we had an innate ability to tackle life head on. Everything seemed so simple and uncomplicated. Although we were messy, life didn't seem to be. As children, we each held the secret answers to a happy, fulfilled life. The bad news is that when we grew up, most of us completely forgot those answers.

What the heck happened? If things were so great and we had such a wonderful way of handling life, why did we ever abandon these little nuggets of wisdom?

Here's what I think we should blame it on: puberty. Adolescence and puberty were stages that shockingly and uncomfortably tore us from the simplicity of childhood into the complexity of adulthood, and I don't think any of us wants to relive that portion of our lives. (High school gym class, anyone?) Perhaps in our rush to actually get beyond the uncertainty and uncomfortable horror of that phase, we quickly embraced all that adulthood had to offer. When we were kids, being grown-up seemed so fun and exciting and mysterious. "Adulthood" was like a secret land filled with boundless opportunities, every one of them off-limits to kids. As children, we spent a lot of time playing dress-up, imagining what we would be. We couldn't wait to shave, drive, date, and drink beer. Then, eager to get past the pimples and awkward points of puberty, we cast aside everything that was childish in order to be accepted as grown-up. And in this process, we begin to lose sight of the secrets that we once knew by heart. The reality and responsibilities of life begin to weigh on us, and the burdens of work, bills, and family life cover over these childlike traits. We become jaded, dull, disillusioned, and depressed, with super-high stress levels. We suddenly have too much to do, but never enough energy to get it all done. This condition is called "Adultitis."

ADULTITIS

A common condition occurring in people between the ages of 21–121, marked by chronic dullness, mild depression, moderate to extremely high stress levels, a general fear of change, and, in some extreme cases, the inability to smile. Patients can appear aimless, discontent, and anxious about many things. Onset can be accelerated by an excess burden of bills, overwhelming responsibilities, or a boring work life. Generally, individuals in this condition are not fun to be around.

It doesn't take long before we all come to a realization: adulthood sure isn't what it was cracked up to be. It's way more complicated than advertised. Technology was supposed to make our lives easier. Perhaps it has, to some degree, but can I get a show of hands from anyone whose life is simpler? Or who has more time on their hands thanks to this blazing technology? Anybody?

Things like e-mail and junk mail, deadlines and divorce, mortgage payments and car payments, taxes and heart attacks, have dampened all of the unbridled fun we were supposed to have when we grew up. The whole "living on your own" and "living by your own rules" dream hardly materialized the way that we imagined it would.

But where is it written that we need to succumb to all of these external pressures and be so serious all the time? Most of us will agree that life can be just a tad overwhelming at times. I mean, wouldn't it be nice to go back to the days of afternoon naps with a warm homemade

cookie waiting for you when you woke up? Those days are long gone. Or are they? Is there a way to actually escape this thing called “adulthood” and return to childhood?

That’s where the good news comes in. I think there are eight ways to escape “adulthood.” You see, these traits from childhood are not the exclusive property of children. They are inherent in all of us, placed there by our loving Creator. It’s kind of like how birds have natural instincts built in that remind them to fly south for the winter, and where to look for worms. Birds depend on these instincts to live. We, too, have certain natural instincts that help us to live our lives to the fullest. All children have them. We’re born with them. They come naturally, and they never really go away, even if they’re a bit rusty.

For some people, they’re really rusty.

This manifesto is my humble take on what Jesus was talking about a few thousand years ago when He said, “Unless you embrace the kingdom of God like a little child, you will never enter it.” On the surface, that’s quite a challenge and something to think about. What does it mean? Does it mean we’re supposed to shirk all responsibility and skip work to go build snow forts? Start paying our bills with Monopoly money? Begin limiting our diets to chicken nuggets and macaroni and cheese?

Just a wild guess, but I’m thinking that wasn’t His intent. I’ve observed that children have a lot of wonderful things to teach us. Some are obvious, like the idea that it’s probably not a very good idea to stick things up our nose or in our ears. But after much reflection, I’ve been able to nail down eight really important qualities that kids naturally exhibit. My hope is that they might shed some light on your life and enable you to get more out of it.

As you read, these secrets should start to make a lot of sense; because, remember, they’re already inside of you. Just like a mother’s natural desire to care for her young, these traits were baked in from the very beginning. And even if your childhood was less than stellar, or downright horrible, don’t despair. Sadly, due to circumstances beyond our control, not every-

one is fortunate enough to fully develop all of these qualities throughout their entire childhood. Abuse, poverty, tragedy, and neglect are just a few of the things that cause children to grow up way too fast, resulting in some of these values to be hidden or neglected. But they are never destroyed. They are always there, waiting to be discovered and utilized. Who says we can't have a second childhood? One that's even better than the first! As I said earlier, these hidden qualities are not exclusive to children. In fact, people of all ages have embraced these ideals and become extremely successful, living happy and fulfilled lives. Fortunately, Adulthood is completely curable.

Let's face it: No matter how hard we try, we're never going to be six again. Ever. Furthermore, we would be doing a great disservice to others if we acted blissfully unaware of the world around us, because, believe it or not, there is a great benefit in growing up and becoming an adult. That's right! We finally have the power to do something about the problems we have come to see around us. It doesn't do anyone any good to dwell aimlessly on an idealized return to childhood, but I think it is very worthwhile to spend some time thinking of how we can bring some of those long-lost childhood ideals back into our lives. We just need to escape the adulthood we've created for ourselves.

1. DELIGHT IN THE LITTLE THINGS

Our society has become so consumer-driven and materialistic that it doesn't take much for us to get sucked up into wanting to move on to the next big thing, or the rewarding new elaborate experience, hardly taking the time to appreciate the present moment. It's easy to grow discontented with our current situation when there is something newer, bigger, or faster out there.

Kids seem to more easily grasp the importance of little things, things that aren't really things. And the little things are big deals.

My family took a fair number of vacations when I was young. When I say vacations, I'm not talking about European jaunts or Disney World® adventures. No, these vacations never extended more than a few hundred miles from home, usually lasted no more than a long weekend, and often involved a discount motel with a loud air conditioner and an overheated pool.

And we loved them! They were a break from the routine, a chance to see something new, and an opportunity to go out to eat in fancy restaurants ... like Pizza Hut®. I'm not sure how I was able to have so much fun on these budget-friendly road trips, while some kids find themselves bored at Disneyland. Perhaps it is simply because the latter are conditioned to look to the next thing.

Life is a blessing. To become awakened to and get caught up in the ordinary details and hidden surprises that often get lost in the ebb and flow of our days are among the greatest blessings life has to offer. Children see every day as a new adventure, an opportunity for great discoveries, be they large or small. Kids are routinely surprised by how cool life is. It is not uncommon for them to be absolutely THRILLED by such things as a lightning bug in captivity, the intricacies of a snowflake, and the giddiness of taking a bubble bath. They're turned on by helium balloons, bedtime stories, and cereal box prizes.

My wife Kim was a kindergarten teacher, so she got to see things through kids' eyes every day. Kindergarten seems to be filled with little things that take on spectacularly gargantuan proportions. In kindergarten, the hundredth day of school is a BIG DEAL. Big enough to warrant a party complete with candy, cookies, and chocolate cake. Losing your first tooth commonly occurs during kindergarten. THAT is a BIG DEAL. The Tooth Fairy and her satchel of shiny coins make it so. Planting seeds into a little cup filled with soil is fun, but it's a BIG DEAL when that little seed sprouts and pokes its head up through the dirt. I can't help but

wonder, is it that a kindergartner has so many more things to experience, or is it more a matter of perspective?

One more day is a big deal to parents whose seven-year-old son is dying of cancer. The ability to hear music is a big deal to the conductor who has become deaf. A Happy Meal is a big deal to a child who doesn't know where his next meal will come from. An old apartment with no air conditioning and third-hand furniture is a big deal to someone who is homeless.

One way to take better stock of the little things is to SLOW DOWN. We adults make it hard on ourselves. It's hard to notice the little things when you're running around like a chicken with its head cut off. I really have seen chickens run with their heads cut off, and they are, not surprisingly, quite frantic. When you're riding life as if it's a speeding New York subway train, it's gonna be a little hard to notice that every snowflake is different. Many of us arrogantly go around thinking we've seen everything interesting there is to see. With that attitude, it's easy to be closed to the idea that by slowing down, we might notice something we wouldn't see otherwise.

It may seem overly simple to say that paying more attention to the little things will make such a big impact in your life. Maybe. But living for the next "big thing" and running around like a chicken with your head cut off is not very rewarding either—just ask the chicken. If you're unsatisfied with life, bored, or feel envious of your neighbor, try slowing down and looking around.

When you foster a greater attention to the little things, almost magically, life will become more enjoyable and more exciting. You'll be more appreciative of life, and thankful for what you have. Because of this newfound appreciation, you'll feel less drawn to work like a hamster in a wheel in order to find happiness in a fancier car, or a bigger home, or on a beach somewhere in the Bahamas. Correspondingly, stress levels go down—way down.

The next time you're around children, pay close attention to them. Notice how excited they are to find a penny on the ground (even more so when they get to throw it into a fountain). Pay attention to how excited they become when they get to push the elevator button. It won't take long, but after some serious study, you'll start to smile at the little things kids get excited about. They think dandelions are pretty, and when paired with wild violets, they become the most beautiful bouquet in the world. They love licking the leftover batter out of a bowl and putting ladybugs in a jar. They're giddy over the turkey wishbone and delighted by sparklers. They love walking barefoot in the grass and collecting seashells on the beach. It is undeniable that kids make a big deal out of little things; as far as I can tell, they seem to be having a pretty good time.

Maybe you could join me in trying to make a bit more of an effort to notice, and get excited by, the little things. Make an effort to foster within yourself a wonder and appreciation for the little things around you. I assure you it will do wonders in helping keep you young at heart. Because, as author Tim Hansel said, "Life is really fun, if we only give it a chance."

2. DREAM BIG

What's the deal with Santa Claus? I mean, how on earth did we buy into him when we were kids? Seriously. Somehow, back then, the whole concept of the big guy in the crimson suit was one-hundred percent feasible. Think about it. Take an old guy who never appears to age beyond, say, sixty-five, even though tradition has him old enough to make Yoda seem like a young buck. Somehow, he's able to stop by every single kid's house on Christmas Eve. Every single one. Even if you take out the boys and girls who've been exceptionally bad, you still end up with a pretty staggering number of houses to crash. To be fair, I guess he does have the advantage of a magic sleigh pulled by eight flying reindeer (nine if Rudolph is on shift),

which certainly eliminates any traffic snarls. But still, I haven't even touched on how he crams his jolly plump frame down your chimney (along with that new bike).

I thought I was a real Sherlock Holmes when I was younger and I asked my mom about the other kids in my class who didn't even have chimneys. Not to worry, she assured me, he gets into the house another way. Of course, I thought, he probably gets tips from the Tooth Fairy and the Easter Bunny. Somehow, it all makes perfect sense to kids. I'm just glad all these folks use their secret powers of entry for good and not evil, as I'm sure they'd make excellent burglars.

The peculiar thing is that for some reason, when we grow up, we gradually lose the ability to see the magic in possibility. Now, before you close this manifesto and write me off as some wacko who advises people to believe in overweight elves and tooth-pilfering fairies, consider Orville and Wilbur Wright. They went around telling people that they'd very much like to fly. And they went so far as to start the process of creating a machine that would let them do so.

I wonder what the townsfolk said. Do you get the feeling that a sense of overwhelming pride was not the first to cross their mother's mind? And yet the brothers persisted, determined to figure out a way to make science fit their lofty ambitions. They didn't let the naysayers convince them that it couldn't be done. Yes, they failed many times, but not even the townsfolk would dispute their ultimate success. The last time I checked, there were about 50,000 of these harebrained, crazy flying machines operating in the United States every day. It amazes me how we take for granted such an impressive accomplishment that appeared incomprehensible less than 100 years ago. I think we all owe a debt of gratitude to the Wright brothers for daring to believe in such a ridiculous dream. And, speaking of travel, if not for Henry Ford's determination to live his dream, we might still be figuring out how to ride a better horse.

It's easy to cast aside a child's simplistic and naïve approach to the world, but let us never disregard an affinity for believing the impossible. If you ever think something is impossible,

remember the bumblebee. According to the laws of aerodynamics and physics, it is supposed to be impossible for a bumblebee to fly. I guess the bumblebee never got the memo on that one.

When I was in college, the mother of my favorite professor passed away. Upon returning from her funeral, he talked about what a full life she had lived (nearly a century's worth of years). He said that she had gone to school on dirt roads in a horse and buggy. Through the course of her life, she saw man travel to the moon, the invention of a moving picture box with sound that we now call TV, cures for innumerable diseases, and the arrival of fax machines, cell phones, computers, and the Internet, all of which were either dubbed impossible or so "out there" that they hadn't even been previously imagined. It's hard to fathom what advances we'll see in the next 100 years, but I can assure you, somebody is already dreaming about the possibilities—probably a little kid somewhere. Neil Armstrong was one of those men who traveled to the moon and the first person to go for a stroll up there. He once said, "Ever since I was a little boy, I dreamed I would do something important in aviation."

With all the evidence of the impossibilities becoming possible, why aren't more of us on the dream-big bandwagon? It's another side effect of Adulthood. In the process of "growing up," our minds became unconditioned to that way of thinking. We're inundated by messages from people who say things like, "Quit spending your time chasing silly dreams," or "It's time to get serious," or "You're not good enough for that," or "Just who do you think you are?" Children believe in the impossible. There is no reason grown-ups shouldn't also. Take stock in the Queen's words to Alice in Lewis Carroll's *Through The Looking Glass*:

Alice laughed. "There's no use trying," she said. "One can't believe impossible things."
"I daresay you haven't had much practice," said the Queen. "When I was your age, I always did it for half an hour a day. Why, sometimes, I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast."

Children aim high. They grow up dreaming of careers as superheroes, ballerinas, professional baseball players, and President of the United States. They can spend an entire day in the

backyard, digging in the sandbox, with the full intention of making it clear to China, or at the very least, uncovering a pile of old dinosaur bones. I challenge you to make an effort today to model a child's ability to dream big. Really big. Why waste your time dreaming little dreams? Dream big and you can accomplish things that you once thought were impossible. You'll make a profound difference in the lives of people around you. You'll have the fuel needed to achieve success beyond your wildest imagination. As musician Les Brown once said, "Shoot for the moon. Even if you miss, you'll land among the stars." I wonder what Neil Armstrong was shooting for.

3. GET CURIOUS

Anyone with a three-year-old will tell you that her favorite word is why. Parents do the best they can to deal with the onslaught of curiosity, but apparently, there IS a limit to just how many "why" questions one human being can handle. By the time the kids become teenagers, all parents can seem to muster is, "Because I said so."

Questions come easily for children, and curiosity is found in abundance. Certainly that makes sense, because, to a child, everything is new and undiscovered, begging to be explored. It seems that the taller we get, the shorter our range of curiosity becomes. It's hard to say why exactly, especially because even after one attains a masters degree, or even a doctorate, there is no shortage of knowledge yet to be attained. In this information age, we could live to be a thousand and probably still not learn everything there is to learn.

Perhaps we're so concerned about fitting in that we don't want to rock the boat by asking questions, or maybe even more likely, we don't want to appear foolish in front of others by admitting that we might not know something. It's hard to dispute the fact that natural curiosity appears to wane as we grow up. I suppose that schools themselves could share the blame

as well. Albert Einstein himself said, “It is, in fact, nothing short of a miracle that the modern methods of instruction have not yet entirely strangled the holy curiosity of inquiry.”

In any case, by stifling our natural curiosity, we really miss out on a lot. Not only do we miss the opportunity to broaden our range of knowledge so we can make a respectable showing should we ever land on *Jeopardy!*, but we may also miss an opportunity to improve our lives, or even to change the world.

An open, observant mind, one receptive to the magic of curiosity, can generate some very good (and profitable) ideas. For instance, Leo Gerstenzang saw his wife awkwardly trying to clean her baby’s ears with toothpicks and cotton, and the idea for Q-Tips® was born. Let’s all be grateful for that one. Who wants to see toothpicks being jammed into the ears of little babies?

Roy Speer and Lowell Paxson observed three things about people’s lifestyles: (1) People like to shop; (2) people like to watch TV; and (3) people like to do both of these things anytime they wish. Speer and Paxson made hundreds of millions of dollars by capitalizing on those observations and creating the Home Shopping Network, a 24-hour-a-day TV shopping channel.

King C. Gillette was looking for an idea for a throwaway product to market. Upon finding his razor dull, he thought of the safety razor with disposable blades. Reportedly, it’s the best a man can get.

While in India, a man named Will Parish curiously observed how a dinner he ate was heated with flaming cow dung. Appetizing, I know. The burning cow pie led Parish to create National Energy Associates, which burns 900 tons of manure a day, producing enough megawatts to light 20,000 American homes. Fortune magazine dubbed him the world’s true “entre-manure.”

I think what these examples show is how important it is to keep your eyes open, no matter how old you are. There is much to be gained via the art of observation. While we naturally seem to “outgrow” the inquisitiveness that can make a four-year-old pick up a dead bird found on the side of the road and stick it in his pocket, it’s important to remember that curiosity is really a state of mind, an attitude. Fortunately, that’s something available to everyone, even those over 36 inches tall.

Curiosity is an attitude, a state of mind. Because of that, it can become a conscious decision. Our curiosity is waiting to be unleashed. There is no shortage of good opportunities available to us, from holding a newborn to marveling at the patterns of a snowflake. Curiosity is not limited to the young, but it is they who have it truly mastered. I think one of the most important words in the vocabulary of anyone who wants to be successful is the same word that three-year-olds use every day: why.

There have been countless businesses that have crumbled and disappeared primarily because people within the organization forgot to ask “why?” A company might be in trouble when the answer to any “why” question is “Because we’ve always done it that way.” Likewise, many opportunities have opened up and businesses been built thanks to individuals who have heard, “We’ve always done it this way,” and asked, “Why?”

Only men should be allowed to vote ... “Why?” The only market for computers will be very large corporations ... “Why?” We all concur that the world is flat ... “Why?”

Being curious and asking plenty of questions helps you become wiser and more knowledgeable, uncover opportunities to solve unsolvable problems, and open doors to improve the financial standing of your family, your friends, or your business.

I shall close with another thought from my white-haired friend Einstein, who was quite passionate about this subject of curiosity. He said, “The important thing is not to stop questioning. Curiosity has its own reason for existing. One cannot help but be in awe when he contemplates

the mysteries of eternity, of life, of the marvelous structure of reality. It is enough if one tries merely to comprehend a little of this mystery every day. Never lose a holy curiosity.”

I guess even a genius can embrace a childlike spirit.

4. LIVE PASSIONATELY

As a young boy with a wild imagination, the Star Wars® movies fascinated me. There was little I was more passionate about. I grew up knowing just about every line of dialogue from the movies, I memorized all of the names of the characters, and admired the vision and creativity of George Lucas, the creator of Star Wars. I had Star Wars birthday cakes, a Star Wars lunchbox, a Star Wars bank, Star Wars coloring books, and ate Star Wars cereal. I went to sleep in a bed outfitted with Star Wars sheets while wearing Star Wars pajamas and dreaming little Star Wars dreams. As I said, there was little I was more passionate about.

One dictionary defines “passion” as “great enthusiasm.” Another describes the word as meaning “a powerful feeling,” with synonyms including fervor, fire, and zeal.

Kids tackle most activities they encounter with passionate and reckless abandon. Think about a youngster unwrapping a large present on his birthday. The shredded paper left in the aftermath is proof that the activity was not lacking fervor. What about when a girl gets to run free in a park with a tremendous climbing area? Shortness of breath and skinned knees don’t happen to someone without at least a little fire. And have you seen a child attack a chocolate ice cream cone on a summer day? I submit that the hopelessly stained shirt is undoubtedly owned by someone with a healthy helping of zeal. It’s hard to imagine many situations that children don’t bring passion to. Heck, they even avoid eating broccoli with high levels of passion. Yet what seems so easy to see in children is often very hard to find in adults—especially the ones infected with Adultitis. A typical morning commute will provide

plenty of examples of passionless people. Our passions have been buried in an avalanche of routine and mundane chores. We get bored with life, most of which is dictated by someone other than ourselves.

Is your morning Danish served with a side of dread and dullness? Or do you get out of bed every day excited about what the day will bring? Kids do. They're eagerly up at the crack of dawn to tackle the new day with energy and enthusiasm (and not in the least concerned with wasting any time fixing the bed head or extinguishing morning breath, I might add). I agree with Holiday Inn® founder Kemmons Wilson, Sr., who said, "If you don't have enthusiasm, you don't have anything."

Except maybe an advanced case of Adultitis.

The question is plain. What happens as we grow up that causes us to live lives that are so stale and tedious? Why don't we spend more time on things we're truly passionate about? Why are so many of us stuck in unfulfilling careers? Are we waiting for some sort of permission? If so, I give you permission, right now. Spend more time on things you're passionate about. Maybe it's just me, but kids sure do make life look fun. Start with your hobbies or interests. Are you spending time doing stuff you really love, whether it's gardening, scrapbooking, cooking, drawing, or helping out with the decorations at church? You and your loved ones will benefit greatly if you can figure out a way to squeeze in a little more time for your hobbies.

But why stop at the hobbies, I say. Take a look at your career. Are you spending the bulk of your waking hours on something you're passionate about? If so, great! If not ... why not? Did you know that people stuck in unfulfilling career paths often experience headaches, stomachaches, loss of appetite, high blood pressure, lack of sleep, and even depression? Yikes. If you ask me, those are pretty sure signs that your body is trying to tell you something. Are you one of those people who thinks it's impossible to do something you're passionate about AND make a living at it? Guess again. Time and time again, countless people have proved the

axiom “Do what you love and the money will follow” to be true. I have in my own life several examples of people who have made a career out of what they’re passionate about. If you look hard enough, I’m sure you’ll find that you know some, too.

The benefits are easy to see. When you’re doing what you love, you’re more likely to put in the extra hours and make the sacrifices that are needed to be successful. In the long run, you’ll be more productive because you’re interested in the work at hand. And the time you spend “working” won’t seem like work at all because you’re actually enjoying yourself. Enthusiasm makes things more fun.

Don’t think for a second that you are excluded from being able to really embrace that which you are passionate about. Every day, people bury their passions, thinking that because they have physical limitations, don’t have an education, or don’t have time because they are busy supporting their family, they are doomed to a passionless existence. Everyone has obstacles that stand in the way, but passion is the number one key to success. If what you want to do requires education, your passion will lead you to it. Passion will also help you through the tough times, the hard work, and the sacrifice.

It is often said that you don’t choose your passion, but rather that your passion chooses you. I think we were all born with something inside of us that really excites us, something that we are very enthusiastic about. Indeed, the word enthusiasm comes from the Greek roots “en” and “theos,” meaning “God within.” It’s a fire within you.

What is your passion? Have you buried it in the past, or in the basement? Whatever it is, find it. Whatever it is, do it passionately. “If a man is called to be a streetsweeper,” said Martin Luther King, Jr. in one of his famous speeches, “he should sweep streets even as Michelangelo painted, or Beethoven played music, or Shakespeare wrote poetry. He should sweep streets so well that all the hosts of heaven and earth will pause to say, here lived a great streetsweeper who did his job well.”

Whatever you do, do it with enthusiasm, fervor, fire, and zeal. Do it with passion. And may the Force be with you.

5. PLAY

Imagine any city sidewalk on a rainy day, and you will realize that most grown-ups will do anything they can to avoid puddles. Now imagine the same sidewalk filled with children. I can only speculate that there won't be much walking going on, and I doubt very much if any puddles would remain untouched. Moms know: a child has the magical ability to become absolutely drenched from only a Barbie® shoe's worth of water.

When exactly is the point in our lives when we stop plowing through puddles and start avoiding them? What's the moment when we stop being so carefree and start being so measured and careful? Is it at the age of 10? 16? 23?

As we grow up, it's easy to steadily lose that playful spirit that used to roam as free as a hyperactive butterfly. Look at the way many of us approach vacations, for crying out loud. You know, vacations ... those things we take that are supposed to fulfill that instinctive need for play? Even our vacations have become work. We gotta plan for this, be sure to pack that, make certain we can see this and do that, cramming as much "fun" and "joy" as we can into our "relaxing" little vacation. If left unchecked, planning a vacation can make Einstein's Theory of Relativity look like the instructions for chewing bubble gum. And that's not even taking into consideration those of you who wear your beepers on the beach. You know who you are.

I think we can all agree that if there's one thing kids are experts at—it's playing. I look back on my childhood summer days in complete amazement. I don't know how it was possible, but I was busy. Extremely busy. My days were packed. With what, you may ask?

Well, I'm not really sure. It's not like I had a Fisher-Price® Palm Pilot® or anything. But if I had, it would have needed a bigger memory card. My days were absolutely loaded with lots and lots of playing. Any given day could have had me feverishly racing my Ferrari (I mean Spiderman Hot Wheel®) up and down the gravel lane, constructing a sprawling urban development made of sticks and sand, or creating Guggenheim-ready works of art on the sidewalk with a few nubs of chalk. When I was five, I had no official job (other than the arduous task of pulling weeds in the driveway for my dad), no bills to pay, and no commitments to run to. But, somehow, I fit so much playing into my day that it was often hard to find time to eat a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. Come to think of it, I may have been a playaholic. And I bet you were too. (Admission is the first step.)

I wonder how it's possible for a person to become so inept at something at which they were once so good. And not only good at, but an expert, no less. It's like a world-renowned brain surgeon getting to the point where he has trouble locating the skull. Or a .300 hitter running to third base on a ground ball up the middle. It's sad, really sad.

The need to play is built right into us. It's a custom-made stress release valve. We've gotten a little out of practice, however. Did you know that preschoolers laugh up to 450 times a day? That's a lot of knock-knock jokes. The average adult laughs just 15 times a day. Aside from the sticky hands and endless bathroom stops, with whom would you rather make a cross-country trip? I'd say our biggest problem is that we don't understand, or take for granted, how much value play holds, and often relegate it to a level light-years lower than that of work. We often look at play as "unproductive," and thus it has a hard time making it onto our cluttered to-do lists. We can be made to feel guilty if we bypass some work to toss around the Frisbee®, enjoy a captivating novel, or partake in a leisurely walk on a fall day.

We need to play. We need to live life to the fullest. And a life lived without an abundance of laughter and playfulness is one that has been seriously shortchanged. Play decreases stress

levels and provides us with the energy we need to tackle the never-ending to-do list. It's always easier to accomplish things when you're not "white-knuckling" it.

There are different types of play that involve a wide range of activities. Do you enjoy reading romance novels? Downhill skiing? Cheering your favorite sports team to victory? Getting together for drinks with friends? Writing short stories? Collecting antiques? Building furniture? Spending time in your vegetable garden? All of these activities are considered playful (if you enjoy doing them, that is), and I promise you that you'll be less stressed-out and happier if you schedule more time for them. Yes, some of us have gotten so out of shape when it comes to playing, it is absolutely necessary to schedule time for it. We're so used to scheduling everything else into our busy lives that anything left off the list is left in the dust.

The usefulness of play does not wear out as our grey hairs grow in. We all know that life doesn't get any easier. Life is filled with ups and downs, twists and turns. I can't help but wonder how many fewer heart attacks we'd see in this country if we took more time to play as adults. God knows we could use it. In fact, statistics show that stress has been linked to all of the leading causes of death, including heart disease, cancer, lung ailments, accidents, cirrhosis, and suicide. I wonder if that has anything to do with the fact that we spend less time playing. Humorist Josh Billings said it perfectly, "There ain't much fun in medicine, but there's a heck of a lot of medicine in fun."

6. BE HONEST

The checkout line resembles rush hour traffic on a New York City bridge. Long, snarled, and sedentary. You wonder how in the world it's physically possible to have stood in a line for twenty minutes and actually be FARTHER from the checkout. You scan the tabloids to pass the time, and after one too many stories of alien abductions and people born with hooves,

you think to yourself, “At least I’m not having that bad of a day.” And you’re right. That is until your daughter, who is sitting in the shopping cart, stares and points at a larger gentleman with hairy arms and loudly proclaims, “Hey, that guy looks like a big gorilla.”

Suddenly, if faced with the decision, you’d choose hooves.

Every parent probably has a similar story to share, primarily because of the undeniable truth: left to their own devices, children are unequivocally honest. We all started out in life expressing our true feelings freely and spontaneously.

My mother-in-law re-learned that little tidbit recently. She was having a conversation with her grandson, talking about things that interest little boys. Suddenly he stopped, and thoughtfully said, “Grandma, did you know you have grey hair?”

“Yes, Tristan, I am aware of that,” responded Grandma.

“No. Really grey. You should look in the mirror. And you have a yellow tooth, too.”

Kids start out pretty honest, but I think they usually learn the fine art of lying from us grown-ups. It’s not that we maliciously intend to warp their little minds, but we often can’t seem to refrain from telling those little white lies. Like when we tell them that something “won’t hurt a bit” when it really feels like some form of medieval torture. Or that the local toy store no longer sells Barbies® of any kind. Or we promise that we’ll play that riveting game of Candyland® later, secretly knowing that in this case, later means ... never.

My own father has been a model of honesty in my life. After enjoying a meal at a restaurant and upon the arrival of the check, it is not uncommon for my dad to find an error in which he has been undercharged. Many people would take the attitude of “their error, their loss,” but not my dad. He has the situation corrected, even if it only amounts to a few cents. That’s the kind of person my dad is, and it has shaped my own moral code.

Sadly, a recent *USA Today* poll found that only 56 percent of Americans teach honesty to their children. Our current state of world affairs is fraught with the consequences of lies, deceptions, and half-truths. I wonder what it would look like if we tried to bring a bit more honesty into our lives. We could all be challenged by giving ourselves a little self-honesty test: Do I always do the right thing, even if no one else is watching? Can I always be counted on to follow through and do what I said I'd do? Do I always mean what I say and say what I mean?

Honesty is certainly in short demand these days, in politics, in the media, and in business. This lack of rectitude has left us all jaded and cynical, often leading us to doubt nearly everything we hear. With high-profile court cases, political cover-ups, corporate scandals, and extra-marital affairs becoming so commonplace, we're sometimes left scratching our heads wondering if anyone tells the truth anymore. We're bombarded with spam, promising bigger this and smaller that. Diet gurus promise instant weight loss, and drug companies promise instant relief (at an outrageous price). Computer viruses come to us disguised as friendly messages from our closest friends. Politicians spin facts in order to get a rise in the polls and use the polls to compensate for their own lack of honest opinion. Will it ever end?

But dishonesty is easy; it can even be profitable. As someone once said, "They say honesty pays, but it doesn't seem to pay enough to suit most people." But although a lie is easy, a guilty conscience sure can make it hard to sleep soundly at night. And even though some businesses have profited handsomely from dishonest business practices, others have discovered how rewarding it can be to admit weaknesses in their own advertising in order to highlight their strengths. It's a fresh approach that builds trust and goodwill with consumers who are starved for sincerity and integrity.

Dr. Phil McGraw has built a veritable empire on being honest. People who have read his books or seen the fiery Texan on TV have no doubts about his honesty. He's another person known for telling it like it is. Is he entertaining? You bet. It's as entertaining as hearing someone

else's daughter call someone in a supermarket checkout line a gorilla. But Dr. Phil has helped a lot of people in the process of being blunt.

It is important that we are not only truthful with others, but we also really need to be honest with ourselves. Alcoholics can only begin recovery when they admit they have a problem. People can only lose weight when they admit that they eat too much and don't exercise enough. In order to see real change in our lives, it is imperative that we be honest with ourselves. The truth can be tough to swallow, but ignoring it doesn't make it any less true. Dr. Phil has it right. "Get real" is his way of saying, "Let's be honest with ourselves, people!" I recommend looking deep within ourselves in an honest fashion, and striving to model a consistent honesty that will leave us with admirable integrity. I believe that it would be far worse to be a man with shallow integrity and able hands than one with limitless integrity and hooves.

7. HAVE FAITH

I can't help but wonder: what do the monsters under the bed do during the day? Where do they go? Do they spend the time plotting evil new ways to cook and season little boys? Do they update the scoreboard that tallies the screams of the children of the world? Or do they perhaps browse the scareology section of the local used bookstore for the latest bargains and bestsellers?

Their daytime agenda may be a mystery, but their modus operandi after dark is not. Under the bright rays of daylight, that space under your bed reveals nothing but emptiness, save a few missing game pieces and a discarded sock. But as soon as the sun goes down and the bedroom light goes out, the shadows slowly crawl up the wall and you hear what seems to be the sound of breathing come from at least one or two hideous, slovenly beasts waiting for an

opening. An opportunity. If your foot should happen to accidentally drift over the side of the bed, you certainly won't live to regret it.

Thank God for the night-light—that dependable guardian of safety—faithfully providing just enough illumination to keep the monsters at bay. Because we all know they just HATE the light.

Being an anxious young lad, I had even more on my mind than those monsters. Apparently one fear wasn't enough—I had to have a full stable of them. It was part of what became a ritual of sorts. My dad would come in after I had nestled into bed, with the customary glass of cold water. After taking a swig, I confided—every night as if it were the first time—that I was afraid of the Thunder and the Lightning and the Fire Trucks. The original Axis of Evil.

And, every night—as if it were the first time—my father would calmly say, “That’s okay, Jason, they’re all in bed now.” And for some reason, somehow, that was enough for me. I was as sure as the snow is white that the Thunder and the Lightning and the Fire Trucks were indeed in bed. With that confident assurance—and the steady glow of the night light—I was able to drift off into dreamland.

Isn't that how it goes with kids, though? The word of Mom and Dad is golden, more reliable than a hot summer in San Antonio. If your dad informs you that babies come from storks, then who can argue? When you skin your knee on the unforgiving sidewalk, and Mom kisses your boo-boo, is it not instantly healed? Kids seem to have an inherent ability to have faith in something bigger than themselves. They trust that their parents know everything and are pretty much on the same level as any of your better-known superheroes.

As we grow up, we begin to see that, in reality, our parents are flawed, confused, and at least a little psychotic (just like us). But that doesn't mean that there isn't still something much bigger than us, looking out for us, and loving us without condition. That seems to get lost in the details of living, as we take the weight of the world on our own shoulders. We worry about our strained marriage, our job security (or lack thereof) and paying the mortgage. We lie awake at

night wondering if we're good-enough parents. We fret about big life changes, which become increasingly indistinguishable from the host of little ones.

In our monster-under-the-bed scenario, it's plain to see when the lights are on and bedtime is hours away, that there are no gremlins under the bed. I look at the light as a symbol of faith. When our bedroom is flooded with sunlight, there are no monsters to be found. That's how it is in life. With a strong faith to light the way, our fears and worries melt away. But as night falls, or our faith wavers, we are much more easily frightened by the distorted shadows of our imaginations.

When you're a kid, whenever you're out in public, you're usually holding your parent's hand. Whether you're crossing the street or at the mall, Dad's got your hand in his, embracing it tightly. It's hard to feel safer. And it provides another nice fringe benefit—you're free to check out the scenery. Without having to watch for cars, or keep an eye out for where you're going, you get to count the cracks in the sidewalk, stare at the funny-looking guy with the bushy mustache, and look for loose change. Best of all, you always end up in the right place.

We may be all "grown-up" now (whatever that means), but I can't help thinking that God still wants us to be holding someone's hand—His. How much better would life be if we didn't have to worry so much about where we were going and had more freedom to enjoy the scenery?

So far, in the relatively short time I've been on Earth, I've found life to be a thrilling adventure, one with more uncertain turns than any roller coaster known to man. The world is a big place; sometimes even scary. By observing the easy faith of children, perhaps we can see that faith can offer us a release from the gnawing worries that press down on us daily. Will we make rent this month? Am I doomed to be involved in the next round of layoffs? How will we ever afford college? Do I have what it takes to be a good dad?

These questions, and many like them, loom large in our lives—even larger than the blood-thirsty creatures that lurked in the shadows of our childhood bedrooms. May we be ever

mindful that there IS someone bigger than the questions, bigger than the monsters that keep us up at night. May we remember that we have a hand to hold through all the scariness that life dishes out, and it's a hand that will most certainly lead us to a safe place. And, in the darkest of nights, may we always count on that simple childlike faith to light our paths, keeping the monsters at bay better than any night-light ever could.

And the monsters will be forced to go wherever it is that monsters go.

8. MAINTAIN PERSPECTIVE

Children possess such a wonderful combination of compassion, sincerity, and selflessness. During one school year, my wife Kim had a student who had Russell Silver Syndrome, which contributed to serious developmental problems. The little girl wore hearing aids and had to be fed through a feeding tube in her stomach. Amazingly to me, her classmates intuitively rallied around her, took her under their wing and looked out for her.

At recess, as kids scrambled out the doors to freedom, Sarah had trouble keeping up with the herd of excited children. But there would always be a handful of classmates who would grab her arm and head out to the playground with her, at her pace. There was more than one occasion when Sarah's hearing aids came out of place, and friends, modeling what they had seen adults do, did their best to fix the situation.

Sarah's feeding routine involved a technique called "venting," which had to be performed every day by people on staff. The only time staff was available to perform the 15 to 20 minute process was during the regularly scheduled (and much cherished) playtime. While the staff was working, Sarah was left sidelined, sitting at a table. Her friends took it upon themselves to bring playtime to Sarah. Every single day, without fail, they would sit at the table with her, playing games in which she could participate. Time and time again, the kids saw past the

superficial differences to the value of Sarah as a person. Their compassionate nature helped her have a very successful and happy first year of school.

I've seen more and more parents working longer and longer hours, trying to compensate for their lack of involvement in their children's lives with "stuff." Expensive, trendy, hard-to-find stuff. Kids certainly love toys, but I doubt I could find one child who would really rather have some electronic video game than an afternoon out with Dad in the park. Kids seem to have an innate perspective on what's important in life. Mark Twain once said, "We are always too busy for our children; we never give them the time or interest they deserve. We lavish gifts upon them; but the most precious gift, our personal association, which means so much to them, we give grudgingly." Indeed, national surveys show that parents spend 40 percent less time with their children than they did 30 years ago.

Children just seem to have an otherworldly wisdom that helps them keep focused on the present. They embrace life as it comes. Perhaps it's easy not to get caught up in the past when you have so little of it, or not to be worried about days far in the future when tomorrow seems an eternity away (especially when tomorrow is your birthday). But there is power in the present moment.

"Don't forget until too late that the business of life is not business, but living," said B.C. Forbes, founder of *Forbes* magazine. It has been said countless times, but it is true every time: No one on their deathbed ever wishes they had spent more time at the office. The growing-up process throws a lot of things at us; before you know it, you forget what the important things are. You'll do fine if you just keep in mind that, as I stated at the beginning of this manifesto, the important things in life aren't things. Things have a nasty habit of staying behind when our time on earth is up.

Kids teach us that the things to be valued are smiles, hugs, laughter, and shared time with the people you love. One of the biggest reasons kids love being read to is not because they

desperately want to hear *Green Eggs and Ham* for the one millionth time, but because they crave and delight in the shared experience.

I've been fortunate to receive these lessons from my experience working with the Make-A-Wish Foundation®: Appreciate what time you've been given. Cherish your family. Pay attention to what's important.

By tapping into our own childlike spirit, we will be able to see what is unseen. The cobwebs will be cleared and we'll be able to tell between the truth and the lies, able to embrace the things that are really important.

When it comes down to it, we only get one life. Let's not miss it.

Well, that's it. Eight little secrets that hopefully aren't so secret anymore. Eight little antidotes guaranteed to cure even the worst case of Adultitis.

I hope that somewhere, in my struggle to find the right words, you've been touched by the truth of the power inside you. The power of childhood. I hope you have come to believe, as I have, that by appreciating the little things, you can break free from the monotony and boredom of adulthood. By daring to dream big, you can truly accomplish things that you never thought possible. And with a little bit of curiosity, you'll be well on your way to new opportunities to change unfavorable conditions and solve seemingly unsolvable problems. Your passion can make even the most mundane chores fun and interesting and lead you to a more productive home and work life. By taking time to play, you'll improve your health by melting away built-up stress and fatigue. A commitment to honesty will lead you to be respected by friends and colleagues, and an increase in faith will ease your mind about the things you

worry about most. Finally, I hope you have been encouraged to maintain perspective in life, so that you can make the most out of every minute you've been given.

Whether your childhood is filled with fond memories, or something you'd just as soon forget, always be mindful that it's never too late to have a second childhood, one that's even better than the first. There is a child inside you who can't wait to run free, who is eager to stomp through puddles, believe in fairy tales, and live life with reckless abandon.

And make angels in the snow.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jason Kotecki is known as The Champion of Childhood. He is an author, cartoonist, and speaker with the mission of helping grown-ups escape adulthood and children have better childhoods. He is the creator of a comic strip called *Kim & Jason* that has delighted readers all over the world, inspiring them to rekindle treasured memories of childhood and embrace the things in life that really matter. Jason is the author of *Escape Adulthood: 8 Secrets from Childhood for the Stressed-Out Grown-Up*. He lives in Madison, Wisconsin and enjoys sugar-laden cereal and long walks by the lake with his wife Kim.

For more details or to buy a copy of *Escape Adulthood: 8 Secrets from Childhood for the Stressed-Out Grown-Up*, visit: <http://www.escapeadulthood.com>

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
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