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Media bias: “The cries of ‘liberal media’ are tired and untrue,” writes Thomas D. Przyzcki of Florissant. Visit STLToday.com/letters to find out why he thinks so, and respond to his letter.

QUOTE OF THE DAY

“Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.”

— Arthur C. Clarke, author

Monday • David Broder, Jonah Goldberg
Tuesday • David Brooks, Maureen Dowd
Wednesday • Paul Krugman, Kathleen Parker
Thursday • Michael Barone
Saturday • Ellen Goodman
Sunday • Charles Krauthammer, Leonard Pitts

UNDERAGE DRINKING



A Sunday morning for spring breakers in Cancun. The bracelets are reminders of clubs visited the previous night. The Associated Press

Parents – and schools – are caving in to peer pressure.

[Cabo San Lucas] is a single’s spawning ground for insignificant others. Romances are created on the spot, a result of the free-pouring tequila and ceaseless cervezas. The party starts when one wakes up in the morning (or afternoon as the case may be) and continues pretty much until one decides it’s time to quit.

– Internet visitors
guide description
of Cabo San Lucas,
circulated among
a group of area
high school seniors.

By Howard Weissman

Allow me to begin with a few truisms:

Truism 1. Teenagers drink. As parents, we either discourage them by reminding them of the illegality and dangers of underage drinking or we preach moderation and the value of making informed, intelligent choices.

Truism 2. Teenagers not only drink, but they also drink *badly*. In general, when they drink, they do not drink in moderation; they binge. They are inexperienced in the ways and means of getting intoxicated and then, when drunk, they take other risks.

Truism 3. No concerned parent wants his or her child to drink heavily.

As parents, we know it’s important to set rules and convey our values as a way to help them manage peer and societal pressures and to provide guidance about risk-taking behaviors. We try, for example, to limit the risks our children take when it comes to sex, drugs and driving. We certainly try not to say or do anything that might tacitly encourage them to engage in risky conduct.

So why do so many otherwise intelligent, informed and responsible parents send their children to Caribbean destinations on spring-break trips whose only purposes are to exploit lower drinking ages and provide kids several days of little-to-no supervision in a hedonistic environment structured to maximize sexual risk-taking and alcohol abuse?

A senior trip to the Caribbean is little more than a week-long drinking binge. For parents who previously have discouraged or even tried to forbid their high-schooler from drinking, allowing such a trip smacks of either hypocrisy or stunning naiveté.

These excursions continue because the spring senior trip has become — particularly in financially comfortable

communities — a tradition. Even though almost no sensible parent or school administrator actually likes it, they all seem to blindly perpetuate it. Why?

One factor I’ve observed is a palpable peer pressure *among parents* to avoid being the stick-in-the-mud who refuses to go along with the majority. Affluent parents also are influenced by a sense that saying “no” is depriving their child: It seems mean to exclude your child from something they so desperately desire, especially when “everyone else is going.”

School districts, whether public or private, contribute to the problem. It’s rare for a high school administrator to caution parents about group trips to the Caribbean (group trips to anywhere, for that matter). Yet any savvy school administrator knows that, while individual 18-year-olds may very well be responsible, intelligent and cautious, a *group* of 18-year-olds given easy access to unlimited amounts of alcohol acts significantly dumber and more reckless than the sum of its parts.

High schools should actively discourage parents from allowing their kids to go on these trips. At the very least, schools should send parents a memo cautioning them about the high incidence of binge drinking, sexual manipulations, bodily harm and legal troubles that occur.

Permitting this so-called tradition to continue — much less encouraging it — invites disaster. Sure, most kids in a group of 30 or 40 come back with nothing worse than some ostensibly funny stories and maybe some embarrassing photos. Problem is, a few others come home with broken bones, sexually transmitted diseases or emotional scars from humiliating, even traumatic, experiences.

While such problems are not widely publicized, they’re no secret. A travel warning issued by the U.S. State Department about “Cancun and Other Resort Areas” reads, in part: “Excessive alcohol consumption, especially by Americans under the legal

U.S. drinking age, is a significant problem. . . . There have been a significant number of rapes. . . . Acquaintance rape is a serious problem. In other cases, hotel workers, taxi drivers and even security personnel have been implicated.”

What will it take before parents realize that the risks of such trips outweigh any possible benefits? How many rapes are enough? How many cases of alcohol poisoning are enough? How many nights in Mexican jails are enough? How many STDs or degrading sexual humiliations are enough? Does the upside really merit these all-too-common downsides? And what is the upside, exactly? Is any teenager’s life truly enriched by such a trip?

It’s time to put an end to this pathological “tradition.” It’s not a tradition; it’s a recurring disease.

Parents: Stand up, come together and uphold your principles. Next year’s trips are being organized right now. Don’t wait for somebody’s kid to come back dead or injured. Unless you believe that preparation for college includes developing a precocious ability to ingest large quantities of liquor, don’t send your kid on a trip like this.

Schools: Take a stand on the issue. Inform and advise parents; tell them the horror stories you’ve been hearing for the last decade.

High School Seniors: Your reward for working hard in school is that you get to go to college. Take some comfort in the knowledge that the world is full of cheap Jell-O shots and wild camera-phone photo ops. You’ll have plenty of opportunities to get wasted, get naked and cut loose.

But there’s no rush. Life’s trip to adulthood is treacherous enough.

Howard Weissman of Clayton is a licensed clinical social worker, a board member of the National Council on Alcohol and Drug Abuse, St. Louis region, and a parent. He is the director of EASE Program, an independently owned firm based in Belleville that provides employee-assistance services to businesses.