

The Kool-Aid Principle

“Hey kids, I have to write an essay about ethics, specifically, about a time that I faced a tough decision, what I did, and why,” I say as I sweep up the kitchen floor crumbs. Do we actually eat anything around here, or just drop it on the floor for artistic purposes? “Can you think of any times when I’ve done something like that?”

“Huh? What’s e-th-iks Mom?” asks my six-year-old, Sawyer.

“Well, it’s like choosing the right I guess,” I try to explain.

Caleb says, “That’s easy, write about making the choice to go to law school.”

“Hmm...I know what you are saying, but that was sort of a choice between two good things, continuing to stay home with you guys or going to law school. I guess I’m thinking more of black and white choices.”

He looks deep in thought for a minute.

“Really? Because when I think of what ethics means, I tend to think that it’s more about gray choices than black and white.” Did I mention he’s smarter than me?

“Wow, that is a really good point Caleb. I’m going to have to think about that.”

“I have another question, what was your hardest, biggest choice ever?” asks my daughter.

“Actually, it wasn’t a big thing at all Aspen. It happened one day at Walmart.”

“Was it the day that a lady got mad at you in the parking lot? Or the day that the cashier was going to ring up 80 goldfish one a time and *you* got mad? Or was it the day that you got hit by a car while you were walking in the parking lot?” Aspen obviously knows too many stories about me and Walmart.

“Maybe you shouldn’t go to Walmart anymore,” quips Caleb. He does have a point.

“Yeah, you’re right. I won’t be going there to buy you that video game we’ve talked about. Ha! Who’s funny now smartypants?” He concedes immediately, video games are big artillery.

“No, it was when you guys were really little. I had all three of you with me, so I was feeling really outnumbered. You guys were probably 1, 4, and 7. We had finished a very long day of shopping for groceries. I finally got you all out to the car, which is pretty much just like herding cats. I loaded you all into your car seats and put the groceries in the trunk. There, at the bottom of the

otherwise empty shopping cart was the biggest, nastiest, test of integrity that any tired mom could ever have. It was a tiny little KOOL-AID packet. A ten cent, ruby red, bomb of temptation, aimed right at my strength and fortitude. I hadn't paid for it. Dang. Now what? I had every reason in the world not to go back inside. I couldn't leave you guys in the car. It was hot, you kids were tired, you were all buckled into the car seats, I had ice cream melting nicely into a puddle in my trunk--I had a million reasons. I thought, the store wouldn't know, or care for that matter, they'd probably just tell me not to worry about it.

So, precisely for thinking through all of those great reasons not to do it, I unbuckled all of you and we traipsed back inside where I handed the offending packet to the greeter."

"But why, Mom? If it was only worth ten cents, would it really have mattered to the store?"

"Well, yes, it might, if we think about what would happen if everyone did that. The important thing about honesty and ethics though, is that I don't think you can really even take that outside kind of thing into consideration or you open yourself up to get very disoriented about what is important. To be an ethical person, you have to consider what it would do to *you* not to return that packet. I know it seems like that packet wasn't worth very much, and it would have been more important if it had been something expensive. I had to ask myself a very important question though. Would I sell my integrity for ten cents? Put that way, the smaller the question, the more important it is to make the correct choice."

"I've never thought about it that way Mom, you're right!" Wow, I don't hear that from the pre-teen very often!

"Well, thank you. I've also thought about how you can't open a package of Kool-Aid without staining your hands, even though it seems so small and insignificant. I think that is interesting. If I would have come home and opened that red Kool-Aid, I would have taught you guys that it's okay to cheat in little ways. That would have "stained" my hands and I would have shared it with you. Little decisions are the building blocks of life-changing moments. I've found that if I always remember the Kool-Aid Principle, it puts everything into perspective for me. I try to be very careful in small things, and somehow that just takes care of the big decisions too. It's pretty hard to end up in a place you don't want to be, if you do your best not to take a step in the wrong direction in the first place."

*An fictionalized account of a real conversation occurring in my kitchen recently.