BAD DECISIONS

Experts say that people cannot make serious, informed judgments until around age 25. There is apparently a specific part of the brain that warns you about possible dangers and foolish choices– but it doesn’t fully activate in a person’s mind until that time. As a result, children, teenagers, and college students will do impulsive or unsafe activities with little if any careful forethought as to what they are risking -- such as physical injury or even death. It follows that some adults would even favor raising the voting age, the driving age, and the marriage age upwards to 25, just to ensure such maturity.

The following are some of my major bad decisions, all made before age 25. Maybe you can relate to them, and remember some of your own too!

My earliest memory (and first mistake) was as a tender child of two, living in our family home on the South Side of Chicago. I was in a highchair at our kitchen table. My mother and her mother were cooking on the stove, and they put a mug of hot water for tea on the table, just barely out of my reach. I remember my mother saying: “Jackie (her nickname for me), now don’t touch this…hot!” Then she and my grandmother turned their back on me and again faced the stove. Being a curious lad, I reached over with my tiny hand and drew the mug towards me. Just as the adults turned around to sit at the table, I had pulled the mug of boiling water down off the rim of the table and onto my neck and chest! I still remember the utter disbelief at being badly scalded. I was wearing a bib over a white t-shirt, and the bare right side of my neck was immediately burned. The boiling water then penetrated the bib and t-shirt as I went into shock. I was told years later that I was rushed to the hospital, where they had to cut away the cloth which was partly fused to my skin. I even briefly went into a coma. The doctors considered doing a skin graft on my neck, but then decided to wait. Fortunately, I would heal on my own at home over time. But now the skin on the right side of my neck is a slightly lighter texture than the rest, and I have to apply sunscreen in that area in the summer because it can quickly burn with excess sun. Ironically, I am an avid tea drinker as an adult, more so than coffee!

When I was eight years old, there was a cute girl my age named Irma who lived down the block. Not knowing any other way to get her attention (and get her to like me in return), I would walk by her house and tease her if she was outside on her porch. I would call her ugly, stupid, or whatever kids said. One hot and humid summer day, I walked by her house. Irma was on her porch alone, playing with a miniature toy gardening set. She had a small 2’ long metal hoe in her hand. I boldly went up on her porch and began my usual teasing routine. Irma said: “You better go away before I hit you!” I scoffed, saying something like ‘girls can’t tell boys what to do’. She exploded in anger and, before I knew it, she had wacked me on the top of my head with the hoe. The sharp metal corner of the hoe went right into my scalp. I was dazed. Irma looked at me in horror and said, “Oh no! I’m so sorry!” and dropped the implement as she ran into her house. I staggered down her porch stairs and slowly walked the half a block home in shock. Because of the midday summer heat and humidity, my face was flushed and sweaty. I noticed that sweat was dripping down my face and into my eyes in an unusual manner. I raised my hand and wiped the wetness away, but when I looked at my hand afterwards, it was dripping with bright red blood! I was stunned and walked home faster. My mom was in the kitchen when I stumbled in, my face covered in blood, now in pain and wailing for help. Clearly alarmed, she dragged me into the bathroom and sat me on the closed lid of the toilet, and used a towel to wipe the blood away, searching for the site of the injury. She found it, and told me to press another smaller towel against it while she left the bathroom. (I remember going to the mirror to peek at my wound. I thought erroneously that my skull was split open and that I could see inside my head into part of my brain!) My mom had meanwhile phoned my dad, and he came from work and drove us to the hospital, where I received several scalp stitches in the emergency room. I recall having to sit up on our living room couch to sleep at night for a few days while the injury healed, because I was told it could start bleeding again if I laid down in bed. As for Irma, for a few years later as both she and I grew up, she would always run inside her house in embarrassment whenever she saw me walk or bicycle by. She and her family eventually moved away from the neighborhood, and I never saw her again.

At age twelve, I was a Boy Scout in Troop 716 at Camp Owasippe, on a lake in Michigan, for two weeks in the summer. I was a good swimmer, and proudly did the mile swim. But there was a floating raft about 200’ off shore. It was tethered to the bottom of the lake by a chain. The water under the raft was about 25’ deep. The challenge among the boys was to hold one’s breath, use the chain to pull yourself to the bottom and grab a handful of mud, and then come back up. Well, many tried it and were unsuccessful. One day, during free swim time, I went alone to the raft (breaking the prime ‘buddy rule’, which meant that you always swam with a partner for safety). I took a deep breath and went down on two attempts, failing each time. Finally, I was determined to do it. I took a huge breath and used the chain to help pull me down, only this time as fast and as strong as I could. I hit bottom! But the mud was so soft at the bottom of the lake that I sunk down deeply up to my mid-shins. The sediment muck was so sticky that my feet were completely stuck. I tried to twist my legs back and forth to release my feet, but nothing happened. I was trapped, and running out of air. I started to panic. I pulled upwards on the chain and opened my eyes underwater and looked up. I could dimly see the light at the surface, but it was a long way up. I started to get dizzy. I prayed and then pulled with all of my might while twisting my legs one last time. I had the feeling that I was going to drown. But miraculously my feet broke free! I pulled myself up using the chain, getting weaker with each pull. Finally, I broke through to the surface! I gasped for breath for several moments, then pulled myself up on the floating raft using its metal side ladder. I laid there for maybe ten minutes, still shaking with fear. Later, I told my buddies what I had done, but nobody believed me because I had not brought back a handful of bottom lake mud! Ironically, I later earned both a swimming and lifesaving merit badge, and even became a waterfront instructor at another summer camp years later. And I always retold my dramatic tale to warn my campers.

In the summer of 1967, just shy of age sixteen, I took my first trip on an airliner. I flew coach from Chicago to Phoenix for $99 round trip. There, I met two friends from my high school, Mike and John. We were going camping out West in the wilds of Arizona. We stopped at some relatives of Mike’s in Phoenix for a few days first, and they provided us with camping gear – tent, sleeping bags, canteens, flashlights, food, cooking equipment, etc. – and even included a 22-caliber rifle with ammunition. We would live like real cowboys out West, only without the horses! This would be a rare adventure for us city dudes. The relatives drove us out to the middle of nowhere (about ten miles from any civilization), but next to the Verde River, and dropped us off for a week. Well, we soon found out that summer in southern Arizona is like being trapped inside a furnace. It was too hot to do much hiking or exploring except during early morning or late at night. So we spent most of our time sitting in our large tent. One afternoon, however, being rather bored, I got the bright idea to take the rifle and shoot it at a flat rock from a few feet away, with the hopes of getting a smashed bullet slug afterwards to take home as a souvenir. So, while my two buddies dozed in the heat, I snuck off by myself to search for a good rock to shoot. Soon, I found what I was looking for. I shouldered the rifle, aimed, and squeezed off a round. The bullet instantly bounced off the flat rock face and zipped past my ear! I realized at once that if my aim had been minutely altered, the bullet could have easily hit me in my head, probably killing me. Stunned, I dropped the rifle on the ground. I was an idiot! After recovering my composure, I hoisted the rifle carefully and went back to the tent. Ashamed, I never told my friends what I had done. I lied and told them that I had fired one shot at a bird and missed. That night, a rough band of six drunken motorcycle gang members arrived. We had the rifle to protect ourselves, but I was sure they would rob and/or kill us anyway. Luckily, they left after about an hour, as suddenly as they appeared. The following night, it unexpectedly poured rain so hard that the Verde River flash-flooded. Our tent had been pitched too close to the water, and it was nearly swept away. Our clothes and sleeping bags were soaked, and tragically, all of our food was lost except for a wet box of Minute Rice. Our return pick-up by Mike’s relatives was still three days off. The following morning, John took ill with a fever. We had dried out our gear in the rising heat of the day, but had nothing to eat but dried handfuls of Minute Rice. We were out of fresh water and our canteens were empty. We had no purifying tablets for sterilizing the river water, but we had a few good matches and were able to boil some water to drink. We realized that one of us had to walk to civilization and get help. Mike felt as weak as John at this point, so the rescue was up to me. I filled my canteen and set out on the desert road. It took about four hours under a searing sky. I was completely alone, looking in every direction for any signs of people. Finally, I arrived exhausted and parched at a restaurant/gas station complex called Reata Pass. I went inside the dark, air-conditioned dining room and begged the owner for a pitcher of ice water. I drank as much as I could, with sincerest gratitude. Then I ordered a large half-pound hamburger with all the trimmings, a large order of French fries, and two bottles of root beer. Never in my life did food and drink taste so good! The nourishment gradually brought me back to my senses. I told the owner what had happened. I didn’t have Mikes’ relative’s telephone number, but I remembered their name and address, so the man looked them up in the phone book. He called, but there was no answer. He told me to take food and water back to my friends and that he would call those folks later and arrange to get us picked up early. He added that he would have driven me back to our camp if he could, but he couldn’t leave his business because his wife was away for the day. So I walked back for four hours with my feet aching, but with a full canteen and a large heavy bag of burgers and fries and potato chips and bottles of pop and candy bars for my friends. They were still lying in the tent where I left them, weak but so happy to see me when I returned with food and drink. And we were rescued the following morning!

When I turned sixteen, I bought the only transportation I could afford – a used, red Suzuki 80cc motorcycle. I taught myself how to shift and ride it and used it for three years. Yet, like a fool, I drove it all that time without ever once wearing a helmet! Granted, it was not the law back then in Illinois to have a helmet when driving a motorcycle. But I regularly ran it on Lake Shore Drive at speeds up to 55mph, and I shutter today to think how badly I could have been injured in a spill -- particularly during rainy days, taking slippery corners at high speeds.

My college days brought a new cavalcade of bad choices and continued stupidity. Drinking ultra-cheap wine to excess on one occasion, I vomited until I thought I would die. Never did that again! Learned my lesson the hard way. Another major mistake of potentially epic consequences was having sex without a condom – and I am ashamed to admit that I was guilty. In the unstoppable heat of passion, guys like me at the time simply assumed that the girl was taking birth control pills, or was wearing a diaphragm. Wrong! We were unwittingly playing a kind of sexual Russian Roulette with our bodies. It was a miracle that there were no unwanted pregnancies as a result! And in probably one of the silliest confessions I will ever admit to, I had a crush on a girl named Pam, who was in one of my NIU education classes. I called her up one night, and shared my feelings. I asked that she wear her favorite article of clothing to class the next day, as a sign to me that she liked me in return. Pam said she would wear her favorite blue jeans if she decided yes. The next day, I was ecstatic to see her thus decked out! We talked a long time after class. It was heavenly! Then, I made a horrific gaffe…what was I thinking? I had been reading books about the spiritual theosophy of a European educator and founder of the Waldorf school system named Rudolf Steiner. I told Pam that her brow and nose looked just like his, and that maybe that was a sign we should get involved. Naturally, her eyebrows went up in absolute shock. I quickly back-peddled and stammered, but it was too late. She simply smiled graciously and said, “Well, eh...that’s nice. I think we better just remain friends in class. Did I tell you that I already had a boyfriend back in Geneva, IL?” Oh, why did I say such a stupid thing? When I told my friends the whole story later, their jaws dropped in amazement. Then they laughed and laughed. What an idiot, I thought sadly to myself. I later apologized to Pam, and fortunately, she took it all in stride and told me not to dwell on my unusual blunder. Sure enough, I soon met another girl named Carla in a comparative religions class, and we had a very nice long-term relationship. We actually had a good laugh together when I finally told her the whole pathetic story!

I was six months shy of age twenty-three during the second weekend of February, 1974. I was with two friends, Joe and Steve, on a small skiing/sledding run at Four Lakes Village in Lisle, IL. From the top of a hill, we could see two lone trees far below, growing at an angle about three feet apart. We had a sled, and the three of us thought it would be exciting to sled down and slip through the gap between the trees at speed. (We didn’t bother to walk down to examine them up close to check for feasibility or safety.) Wanting to be brave and impress my friends, I volunteered to go first. I laid down on the wooden sled on my stomach, and off I went down the hill, continually picking up speed. As I got closer to the tree pair, it became horribly clear to me that it was virtually impossible to thread the gap between them at my current speed and angle of approach. I was coming up too fast and could not turn my sled sufficiently before colliding into the trees. If I hit, I could break my neck or my back or even kill myself with a head injury. About a dozen feet away from impact, I decided to abort by rolling off the sled to the right. Just then, I hit a patch of ice under the snow and it shifted the sled completely out from under me, sending me airborne before I could more safely abort. I saw the tree on the right coming up to my face straight on. I instinctively put my arms out in front of me and turned my face to the right so as not to smash my nose directly into the tree. I guess I was going about 20mph when I hit. My arms buckled and my face took the blow near my right temple and my right ear. I had pieces of bark stuck in my cheek, and the part of my ear where it was attached to my head was torn about a half-inch. A "C"- shaped flap of skin was cut and hanging down near the outside corner of my right ear. I sat up in the cold and snow, stunned and disoriented. My warm red blood started dripping, and the facial swelling of the impact began. Joe and Steve ran down to me, then one went to get emergency assistance. I was taken to the closest hospital for stitches and a two-night stay. The doctors had to wait until the swelling over my eye (and half of my face) went down to see if my vision was damaged. Fortunately it was fine, and I had no major concussion or other side effects. But to this day – every time I look in the mirror – I see the evidence of my very bad decision.

I also learned to skydive and scuba dive and solo a small sailboat before I turned 25, but with those fun activities, I took adequate safety training before attempting the pursuit. Thus, those were risky adventures, but they should not be included in my category of big mistakes or bad decisions.

All I can add is a caution to all parents with children: Watch them, advise them, and warn them of all the potential consequences of any risky undertakings they may attempt – at least until they turn 25. By then, they should know better, and hopefully make safe, wise choices as they go onward into adulthood. We are all prone to still make occasional bad choices even after age 25 -- I know I have -- but hopefully they will be few and far between by then!

THE END

by Jack Karolewski

December 23, 2017