



HEART WARMERS

On Cellphones and Chasing the Devil Around the Stump

By Jeni Janek

My Great Grandmother had a saying back in East Texas when it came to dealing with adverse children or mules; “There’s no sense in chasing a devil around a stump”. It meant that the longer you wait to take action, the more of a waste of time it was. Take on the problem head-on, take action early. Her ire and grit are alive and well in this East Texas girl and a drop or two of it trickled down into my own kids I’m proud to say. But Grandma Grace would shake her head at a few of the situations these days that make chasing the devil around the stump an incredibly difficult and more challenging task.

I check-in with my kids’ teachers now and then to see how I can support them and be in-the-know about classroom activities as I know that when I ask my teenager what happened in school today I will invariably hear “nothing” when I know good and well that this is not the case. When visiting with the Algebra II teacher recently, I learned that by far her biggest struggle in class was dealing with students how were on their phones during the lesson, making it difficult to focus on instruction and pay attention. This comes as no surprise to hear, for the battle of the cell phone (in class) rages daily for nearly every educator I know.

Upon learning that my son was tempted by this devil, I immediately concocted a personal intervention plan to assist with what could perhaps be termed “technologically induced attention deficit”. I offered that my son would voluntarily lay his phone discretely on her desk when he entered the room and would quietly pick it up upon leaving. No fanfare, no drama or some big production. She wouldn’t even have to ask for it. And he knew that she and I were in communication to measure compliance. She accepted the plan with giddy anticipation of gaining his full attention and wonder for whether or not my plan would work. I readied myself with my East Texan grit and braced for the fight with my teenager for asking that he relinquish his lifeline to the world.

When presenting this plan to him, however, I was honestly very surprised that he didn’t put up a fight at all. In fact, he seemed relieved that someone else was taking over because he felt so obligated to answer when he was messaged. He said that it was hard to focus because his phone was constantly going off with messages from his girlfriend or buddies in other classes and that if it was on her desk and I “made” him give it up, then he could focus and not be accused of not responding quickly enough (and they accuse *us* of being impatient...). So my intervention actually took some pressure off of him to respond thus taking time away from the subject he sorely needed to pay attention to.

And it worked like a charm. He slid into class and nonchalantly laid the phone on her desk without breaking his stride. He sat down and worked and initially no one said a word.

Eventually, someone asked him why he did it and he played it off as “not wanting his girlfriend bugging him during class” or something sarcastic yet pointing to him having the power to decide where his phone was and not his mom and teacher.

Other friends started to join in almost in an act of defiance for whomever what bugging them, too. The act was empowering and he didn't mind in the least that the phone was away from the 45 minutes he had to stay focused on his work.

Now, I'm not going to tell you that it miraculously lasted all year. But the teacher was sly enough to recommend times that the phones would like to visit together on her desk as opposed to diverting their attention from parabolas and the next day they all collected there so that the class could be more on-task and the threat of poor grades was somewhat thwarted.

I applauded her efforts to keep the momentum rolling and to offer respite from digital overload for the class. Just that little spin on it made all the difference. So we won the battle of the day.

Oh, the devil is still out there, make no mistake. And we are all in the fight to keep him at bay and from running us in digitally-charged circles. But every now and then we have to celebrate the victory that he didn't get the best of us and that chasing him around the stump isn't going to waste our time.