

The Adolescent Equinox



Or, why I never made it to Chichen Itza

When I began writing pieces for Pastimes, my kids, Lily, Max, and Sam, were eight years old. They were excited about the world and just starting to think historically. This made for great traveling. As a family, we spent free time exploring everything from whaling museums in New England to American Indian cliff dwellings in New Mexico. In short, we had fun.

Last year, as the kids approached twelve and a half, it rapidly became clear that our fun was dwindling. While the kids were fully aware that there is a difference between “then” and “now,” they were increasingly engaged in navel gazing or shrouded in brain fog. Well, that’s not entirely fair. They were beginning to be far more curious about the world present and past when they were with anyone but their siblings, my husband Mark, or me.

For years, friends with teenagers had greeted my happy narratives of exploration with knowing half-smiles. “Enjoy it while you can,” they’d tell me. “Just you wait.” It was inconceivable to me that Lily, Max, and Sam would transit the heavens, turning into adolescent zombies who proclaimed boredom when faced with anything having to do with family, history, and adventure. And yet, with astronomical regularity, as they approached Magic Thirteen, Lily, Max, and Sam began to retreat into themselves.

This became dramatically apparent to me when the five of us went to Cancun last spring. I’m less surprised that it happened than I am at its force and speed. Adolescents are *supposed* to get snotty with their moms and dads, right? Their diminished desire to spend time with parents is the crucial first step they take as they separate and create their own social and familial galaxies. I guess I just hadn’t expected it to happen so soon or to be so nasty. I

especially hadn't anticipated what this shift would mean for our high-spirited, history-themed family outings.

In the middle of last year's fierce New England winter, I trawled the Internet and found a special for a beach resort on the "Mexican Riviera" with two swimming pools, snorkeling, bicycles, exhibits of endangered wildlife, and free excursions to nearby Maya ruins. Like a landlocked cruise, the resort included all meals and evening entertainment, including karaoke night. We could relax in the sun, the kids could claim a bit of independence on those bicycles, *and* we could see interesting animals and have our history lessons. I was all but packed.

From the moment we arrived, I could tell I was going to have a hard time making peace with resort culture. To give you an idea of the place, imagine walking into the breakfast buffet, a cavernous space filled with floral arrangements and tables groaning under the weight of most every conceivable breakfast food, including my favorite—plains sautéed in a honey syrup and sprinkled with coconut—and Sam's favorite, *Zucaritos* (Frosted Flakes here in Boston, little sugary things in Mexico). Because our Cancun resort included unlimited alcohol, there were even cocktails at breakfast. Not up for an actual slice of melon in the morning? No problem. Try some Midori on ice.

Though I was embarrassed by the excess, I appeased my conscience by reminding myself that we'd be getting out of the compound and away from the booze to hike in the ruins. I was most excited about seeing Chichen Itza, but I picked Tulum first because it was closest. Christopher Columbus encountered Mayas in a canoe. Unbeknownst to him, they'd been living on the Yucatan peninsula for a millennium. We, meanwhile, encountered them on a tour bus. Our guides—several short, squat, trilingual men who looked like animated Maya carvings in white polyester *guyaberas* and dark dress slacks—regaled us with stories of the history of their people.

As Lily complained of car sickness and Max and Sam dramatically yawned (*my children?*), the guides told us that the Maya had erected Tulum atop a cliff overlooking the Caribbean as a combination fort and lighthouse. Gesturing with smooth, brown hands, one guide said in English that his ancestors probably built Tulum in the tenth century at a time of declining power so that they could protect themselves from invaders, constructing a wall around three sides of the sixteen-acre site. On its fourth side, he said, Tulum faces out onto sparkling turquoise water. Farmers and commoners, he told us, likely lived outside the fort. Craftspeople and religious elites lived within the walls, performing rituals and directing ocean-going trade. The Maya living at Tulum posted flags at strategic points, signaling to traders the best way to navigate a reef off the rocky shore. Our guide encouraged us to look for a neat, rectangular opening high up on a wall in the main temple, known as the Castillo. Superb astronomers, he told us, the Maya positioned the window so that sunshine would strike particular images carved on a post, announcing the equinoxes and solstices.



El Castillo, Tulum, Mexico. Courtesy of author.

We filed out of the bus into oppressive heat and choking dust. Told that we needed to walk to the site, we took off, children shuffling and grumbling, angling for soda. Our guide met us close to the fort and made quick work of the history of the distant past, explaining in great detail Maya calendars and their reliance on constellations in the sky. He slowed down as he narrated twentieth-century Maya politics, describing how his people had been living at Tulum in the late 1950s when the Mexican government decided to excavate and renovate the thousand-year-old structures. Lily, Max, and Sam perked up when our guide said that, at that time, the kids didn't go to school or wear shoes. Now, he told us, they live off-site and own McDonald's franchises, which aren't lucrative because tourists like us stay at resorts and don't want to eat Quarter Pounders. Sam allowed that he wouldn't mind a QP right then and there. I reminded him that at least he could look forward to tomorrow morning's *Zucaritos*.

We ended our tour at the Castillo, studying the rectangular opening. Mark asked another family to take a picture of all five of us. Max and Sam refused to stop pulling faces. Then came paternal directions concerning hats, sunscreen, and water consumption. Noncompliance elicited more forceful commands. As surely as a ray of sunlight lands on a Maya stele to announce the passing of a season, Max beamed an insult at Mark's heart. It landed on target, separating time past from time future, announcing Max's shift from childhood to adolescence. Just audibly, but with laser-like precision, Max snarled, "Dad's an asshole."

A few months before, Mark and I had driven to Providence—alone—to hear Bill Harley in concert. Harley is a masterful storyteller whose audience is usually made up of children. He was giving a rare "adult" concert, not with X-rated subject matter but with stories parents would enjoy. We'd laughed spasmodically as Harley went through "Neanderthal Boy," a tale about raising teenage sons. Harley recounted the experience of having watched the Olympics with Noah, his oldest, when Noah was a young child. "Dad," Noah had asked adoringly, "you're a really fast runner. Why aren't you in the Olympics?" When Noah turned twelve, his tone changed. "Dad?" he asked, "am I going to go bald like you?" Harley was

astonished when Noah, at sixteen, raged that Harley had “a small, pathetic life.” Who was this sneering teen who mostly just grunted like a Neanderthal? Where had the adoring boy gone?



Mayan carving, Tulum, Mexico. Courtesy of author.

I looked at Max with similar shock and wistfulness. Such an awful thing to say, calling Mark an asshole. As I gazed out at the ocean, I knew that Lily was wishing she had her best friend Sylvie with her so that the two could go swimming; that Sam would be happiest in a hammock, reading Douglas Adams's *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, rather than actually hiking; and that Max wanted to be anywhere Mark and I weren't. I was just so sad to see my children turning into a pack of hobbits, adventure-averse in the extreme.

When we returned to the resort, Max announced that he would not be going on the next day's tour of Chichen Itza. Max couldn't stay alone, Mark said, so he'd hang back as well. If Dad and Max weren't going, Sam said, he certainly wouldn't submit himself to another long, boring bus ride and hot, dusty, pointless hike. Lily, wanting desperately to please me but agreeing with Sam, struggled to make up her mind. "Come or stay, whatever you want," I snapped, pushing back in the voice of an adolescent from whose company I thought I'd long ago parted. I hadn't come all the way to the Yucatan to listen to a bunch of angry teenagers. For me, it was Chichen Itza or bust.

That night, I lay awake in bed. To go or not to go? I flopped around under the covers. I learn by seeing and doing, so touring Chichen Itza was my best shot at knowing something about people who had lived impossibly long ago. But the kids were right. The bus ride was long and boring. The air was dusty and hot. And besides, there was so little time left at the beach on this vacation—so little time when these kids would happily tolerate my company.

I wish I could tell you that I turned on my heel the next morning and took off for Chichen Itza, but I didn't. I stayed behind at the resort with Mark and the kids. We did nothing monumental at all. We snorkeled. We swam. We read. We watched cable TV. And, of course, we ate.

Later, back in snowy Boston, I winced as I looked at the photograph of the five of us at the Castillo. A worse photograph it could not have been. Not a one of us looked happy. Motivated mostly by vanity, I hit the delete button on the camera. The image instantly disappeared. And then I quickly wished I hadn't erased that photograph. It captured the split second before Max insulted Mark, before his adolescent equinox, perhaps the last true moment of his childhood. As I write this, almost a year later—a year, I'll add, punctuated with more ugly comments than I care to recount—the trip to Cancun itself seems like an archaeological site, littered with traces of what once was.

Further Reading:

To learn more about Bill Harley, go to www.billharley.com. The following are helpful in exploring what may be for you uncharted territories: For adolescence, see Anthony E. Wolf, *Get Out of My Life, But First Could You Drive Me and Cheryl to the Mall? A Parent's Guide to the New Teenager* (New York, [1991] 2002). For the Maya, see C. Bruce Hunter, *A Guide to Ancient Maya Ruins* (Norman, Okla., 1986); Richard D. Perry, *Exploring Yucatan: A Traveler's Anthology* (Santa Barbara, Calif., 2002); Robert J. Sharer, *The Ancient Maya, 5th ed.* (Stanford, [1946] 1994).

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