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## Letter from Lost Prairie

### Turning back the clock

“Here at Montana Academy we have turned back the clock. It is 1952 and Eisenhower was just elected.” John often uses this image to illustrate a point. Montana Academy is off the grid of modern communications and we control the lives of our students. Neither BlackBerrys, nor cell phones work on the ranch and communication with the outside world is limited and monitored. We make a virtue of disconnecting teenagers from social media so that they can stop the distractions, focus on the essentials and get down to the work of really growing up.

Last October I made a visit to Myanmar, formerly known as Burma, where the military government also controls the media and allows limited communication with the outside world. My BlackBerry would not work in Myanmar. Hotmail was inaccessible and Gmail tediously slow to connect. This is a police state where citizens must register at the local Police station if they spend the night anywhere other than their own home. Burma was the setting for George Orwell’s (Eric Blair) first novel, “Burmese Days”, which is widely available on the streets. Eric Blair, who had some family connections in Burma, was a young police officer there in the 1920s. “Burmese Days” is a testament to an ugly culture of anti-native, avowedly racist sentiment entrenched in British colonial life of the time. We all know that George Orwell went on to write Animal Farm and Nineteen Eighty Four, two dystopian novels which must have arisen out of his disillusionment and curiously foretell the sinister repression at work in Myanmar today. Emma Larkin, a Burmese speaking American journalist, sees and hears what the casual tourist cannot and explores the theme of repressive government in her perceptive book “Finding George Orwell in Burma.” Finally after 50 years of military rule there are beginning to be signs of change and increased openness in Myanmar. Aung San Suu Kyi has been released from house arrest, is holding discussions with the Generals in power and Hilary Clinton took the opportunity of increased openness to visit.

Yesterday I gave a presentation on Myanmar to the students in Rick Stern's Geography and Global issues class. Our students read Nineteen Eighty Four as a regular part of the English curriculum and many have also read Animal Farm as well as Lord of the Flies, portraits of societies which are fraught with horror. On campus their lives are restricted in an attempt to create a utopian society in which authenticity is valued and transparency between adults and teenagers will lead to healthy adult lives.

We are living in a time of rapid cultural change. I attended the early November IECA meetings in Dallas where the keynote speaker, Leonard Sax M.D., a family practitioner and psychologist from Montgomery County, MD spoke about the disintegration of teenage culture. The generational bonds between adults and children have been eroded, adults have conceded too much of their authority to children and allowed media to assume too great a role in the day to day lives of children. The adults have lost control of the culture and, small reason, then that so many of our young people are confused and at sea about the tasks of growing up. In place of adult role models and close relationships they have turned to each other – the blind leading the blind. I learned a new term “co-rumination,” which refers to teenagers who are hyper connected to each other, ask each other for advice and end up making each other more anxious, because they have no adult perspective to give. Girls receive an average of 135 text messages a day and spend hours each day on Face book – the hugely successful social networking site that seems to promote performing for others rather than presenting an authentic view of the self. This, in turn, suggests that life is always happy, upbeat and funny and so correspondingly the reality of boredom and loneliness makes teenagers sad. Boys have less interest in Face book but, being by nature more action oriented, they often get heavily involved in video games and avoid life's disappointments by retreating into fantasy. Both genders struggle to find an authentic self which will pave the way to an adult identity.

Such cultural troubles are not occurring only in America today. I was shocked to read about the August riots in Britain. The Prime Minister, David Cameron, referred to these riots as evidence of a “slow-motion moral collapse” and characterized them as evidence of “irresponsibility, selfishness and behaving as if your choices had no consequences.” This, of course, sounds a lot like a description of a typical out of control teenager. What is

the solution? Britain operates a sophisticated surveillance system and watches its citizens constantly. It has the most closed-circuit television cameras of any country in the world – one for every 32 people. Small wonder that the suspects in the 2005 Underground bombings were quickly found and brought to justice. Big Brother is alive and well here and yet this has not produced a responsible society. Something is missing.

The latest issue of The Family Therapy Networker features a cover article titled “Are Parents obsolete?” Adults are going to have to wrest back control of the culture from teenagers who should not be left in charge. How can they be expected to manage themselves without good role models and clear guidelines for responsible behavior. Montana Academy monitors and controls the environment. We do not allow free access to media. We search students on and off campus and know what is going on in their lives. We provide structure and containment for teenagers who do not have the wisdom to manage themselves. The adults are firmly in charge but they are also willing to engage with students on all levels. They eat lunch with them. They play with them. They attend daily groups to talk about all aspects of their lives. They act as role models and create close relationships. Within the context of such relationships there are few aspects of life which cannot be discussed. The adults provide perspective along with affection and discipline. We have good reason to think that this model works. Our graduates are proof that with appropriate close adult attention teenagers can grow into responsible and thoughtful young adults.

Best wishes for the New Year,

Rosemary McKinnon