



I kind of hate Instagram. I like it in theory- a place where we can share images that communicate and share our lives, our hopes, our passions. But I hate the twisted and vicious cross I've seen it become in my 15-year-old daughter's life.

When "The Girl" (name withheld to protect the immature) turned 13, my husband and I gave her filtered access to Instagram as a rite of passage, but with a catch. Her account is on my phone, and I go through it daily. We decided that this social media journey was going to be one that we walked together. She didn't need to worry about hiding anything, because I could see it. End of story. My job was to set ground rules, talk with her about what I saw, and listen to her as she shared what she thought. This is part of the modern teenage journey, and ALL teenage journeys are messy. I promised myself to walk with her and not over-react to the messiness, but try instead to make it a learning experience.

I was expecting the slight obsession and proliferation of duck-face photos that followed in the first couple of months, and we set time-usage rules around the app. What became mildly annoying was the way she would ask us to take pictures of her wherever we went, on family vacations, shopping trips, sports events, anywhere. Her request was not just for natural shots to remember the event or landmark, but strange 'pensive poses' where one hand was always loosely in her hair as she gazed into the distance. She wasn't really interested in pictures of the places we visited, but in pictures of herself there, and in finding the perfect caption to go with them.

When she posted these pictures the inevitable comments from her friends became predictable and repetitious, but oh so important to her. "Luv U," "Ur so Beautiful," "Hawt," "Bestie," and so on. I rolled my eyes silently. Flipping through her feed, I saw that they were the same comments found on every other kid's photos. Compliments were reduced to abbreviated badges of acceptance that lacked substance. They were expected with every post, because to lack them was to be "found lacking."

The Girl and I talked through this experience. I asked her what made Instagram important to her and she told me it was a way of belonging. According to her, the point wasn't so much to be unique as to be included. **Each photo said "I have a fun life too," "I am beautiful," "My friends LUV me too."**

Soon enough, The Girl felt fractured, pulled between real life and the Instaworld. **She was living in two universes which included many of the same people, but one was real and the other wasn't. One was full of heart emojis and LUV U's, the other was full of real-life issues from mean girls and gossip to school pressure and responsibilities.** After a while, she became moody and developed the very contagious condition of Teenage Attituditis.

One of my very favorite things about Instagram is the fact that I can take it away as a consequence. It happens on a fairly regular basis and gives both The Girl and I the chance to come up for air and live in the real world. Her angsty tension dissipates, her lovely smile returns. Her dedication to her studies improves. She plays with her little brothers again. It's heaven- at least a taste of it compared to the stereotype of the teenager. And she sees it in herself too. She is more peaceful. She is happier. She admits it. After a month or so, when we return the Instagram privilege, we start again, walking together and navigating this alter-world.

Recently, a boy who was an acquaintance commented on one of her photos, obviously not knowing her Instagram was on her mom's phone. Gone were the inane "LUV U's" and "CUTIE's." The things this boy blatantly said he thought of her body and wanted from her took my breath away and stabbed me through the heart. My husband and I sat down with The Girl and read the comments together. I was shaken, my husband was furious. The Girl didn't think it was a big deal. Perplexed, I asked her why she thought that this was ok. She responded that she didn't think it was ok, but guys talk like this all the time, and it's gross and stupid, but not important, "and please mom, don't make a big deal out of it."

It broke my heart that she was not shocked and offended by this treatment. I took screenshots of the comments to the dean of discipline at our school who acted on them immediately. He sadly told me that he wished that he was shocked, but he wasn't. **In adolescent boys with repeated exposure to pornography, mostly on cell phones, this kind of language and behavior towards girls has been normalized in their brains, even in middle school.** They delusionally think that this is how girls want to be treated, because the porn industry has taught them that. The dean promised me he would deal with the boy and inform his family.

My greater concern was The Girl. It killed me to think she thought it wasn't a big deal for a boy to talk to her this way, that it was annoying but socially acceptable. Her 18 and 20-year-old brothers decided to take this into their own hands. They sat down with her

and told her that her worth was not in what she looked like or in what a boy wants from her. They told her that no one has the right to speak to her this way and that she cannot accept it passively. They told her that she is beautiful and deserves to be respected and honored.

The Brothers scrolled through Instagram with The Girl and pointed out the problems and the lies, breaking the normalization of objectifying people and giving her the responsibility of both projecting and demanding her own dignity.

It clicked. She developed a new sense of self-worth because young men whom she admires (her older brothers) showed her own dignity as a young woman. The Girl stands her ground now. She refuses to be talked to or treated like a body there for someone's admiration or pleasure. I am proud of her, even though my heart is a little broken that she needs to learn this at 15.

I still kind of hate Instagram. But I have learned that like all crosses, God brings good from them. Having a relationship of open dialogue with her family helped The Girl come to know her self-worth in spite of the vicious lies that social media was feeding her about herself. Her brothers, treating her like she should be treated, gave her a standard of behavior that she could hold other boys up to.

instagramIn the wake of the Harvey Weinstein scandal and the #metoo campaign, I was forced to see that The Girl, and many of our young daughters, are being harassed online by boys whose perception of proper behavior toward girls has been warped and deformed by the lies of pornography. The boys aren't all vicious predators. They are also victims who have also been wounded by what they have consumed.

Our kids can't navigate this on their own. They shouldn't have to. As Matt Fradd, founder and director of ThePornEffect.com, said at a recent talk to parents at our school, "You would never let your kid go out in the world without knowing where they are going, who they are with and what they are doing. The online world is just as real and even more dangerous. You cannot ignore them in their online life. You need to know what they are doing, with who, and where. You need to walk with them."

I believe part of the solution to the online #metoo epidemic is in the family. Cell phones aren't going away, unfortunately, so parents and families have to be vigilant and carry this cross together. Our young people ARE under attack and they ARE vulnerable. What they do not need to be is alone and unprotected. If we use parental controls and other means to protect them (although no parental controls are perfect), and accompany them closely, we can show them their self-worth in spite of the lies, teach them how to treat others, and allow God to bring the good from it that He will indeed bring.

The Girl suffered with this cross. And we, her parents, did too. But the good God brought from it for her was a more confident understanding of who she truly is and how to distinguish that from the lies that social media, friends, and people wounded by pornography would impose, intentionally or not. The other good God brought is the resolution my husband and I now have to not let her younger siblings have cell phones until high school. When the time comes, we will walk this road with them too, but in the meantime, we pray they have more time to just be kids.

Covenant Eyes, a faith based organization which focuses on practical solutions for protecting, educating and accompanying your kids in the online world just published a really helpful guide called 5 Things to Do About #MeToo. You can check out all of their resources at www.covenanteyes.com .