

My Quest to be Cool

Jim Hoekema March 2020

Sometime in the 4th grade, at my third school, I came to realize that I wanted to separate myself from my family. The best way to do that, it seemed clear, was to become cool.



My parents were anything but cool. My father was a minister at three different churches in my younger years and then became a professor of theology, training young men to become ministers. The problem with being a “PK” (preacher’s kid) is that everyone knew my father, and hence me. Being a minister placed him at the pinnacle of society in his world – the more conservative and isolationist side of the Dutch Reformed church. This elevated status did not bring wealth, but it did bring social prestige to the “dominee” (as the Dutch called their preachers) and all his family.

Unlike some preachers in that era, my father was not a bible-thumping rabble-rouser – he was a rather scholarly minister, his sermons rigorously based on Biblical texts, often invoked in the original Greek or Hebrew. Every sermon was structured around three points – most of it exegesis, or interpretation of the original text, but with some portion devoted to applying the lessons of scripture to everyday life, plus at least one joke. He could be a little dry, but his congregations appreciated him, even if his remoteness made the messy human side of pastoral care the more difficult of his duties. It was a natural progression to academia, where his courses on systematic theology trained generations of preachers as they fanned out to Dutch settlements around the country.

But for a young boy with an eye toward the outside world, all this unearned prominence was rather inconvenient. Everywhere I went, but especially in church, strangers constantly approached, acting as if they knew all about me.

“Oh, your name is Hoekema? Are you Tony Hoekema’s son?”

“Are you thinking about going into the ministry like your father?”

“I see you have inherited his large feet.”

Anonymity was never an option, especially for a boy who soon reached a height of 6’7.” Escaping this unwanted attention seemed nearly impossible. Claiming some territory of my own gradually became my goal in life, though I did not articulate it exactly that way. My reasons for carving out my own persona would become more sophisticated later on.

In 4th grade, I just wanted to escape the boring, oppressive virtue of my family. I wanted to be cool.

The rest of my family didn't make the task any easier. My mother, for example, was the perfect preacher's wife – no, really! In my college days, another preacher once sat me down to talk me out of my declared apostasy. "I don't understand it," he said. "From your father you can get the best answers to any questions you might have about god or theology or the church." he explained. "And your mother, well, your mother is a saint."

In fact, she was. She never gossiped or spoke ill of anyone, never lost her temper, and always thought the best of people. In my adolescence, I found her "Pollyanna" personality maddening. She taught kindergarten, and I once accused her of having "a kindergarten view of the universe." It seems she was not as sophisticated as my 13-year-old self in understanding the real world.

Then there were my uncool siblings. My older sister, three years my senior, was studious, diligent, not very popular, and utterly lacking in fashion sense. She played the clarinet – a torture to others in the household. She did not have a boyfriend. She did what was expected and did not make waves. Based on my mother's recollections, Dorothy had been a hassle-free baby, whereas my arrival, as the first rambunctious boy, seems to have been a devastating change of pace, to which my mother never fully adjusted.

My brother, three years younger, was even worse. Perhaps sensing my incipient rebelliousness, he quickly carved out the "model son" position. Always the perfect one, he earned straight A's all through school and beyond, and he did not misbehave. He seemed destined to follow in my father's footsteps. (Indeed, he became a philosopher). But as a perpetual teacher's pet and "goody-two-shoes" David did not have a lot of friends, or those he had were equally introverted, enmeshed in chemistry sets, stamp collections, and the like. He also had no idea about fashion.

By contrast, I would like to say that I was a man's man, a star athlete who excelled at sports and drew the admiration of all and sundry, but sadly, this was not the case. I was not athletic, and not very well adjusted. My greatest childhood trauma had been arriving for school in first grade and discovering that my teacher that year would not be the Miss Van Mel to whom I had become utterly attached in kindergarten! Perhaps a gap in affection at home had led to this fierce bond, but I fault my parents for not warning me of this impending change!

Later that year, we moved from Patterson, New Jersey, back to Grand Rapids, Michigan, for my father's third ministerial post. My severe maladjustment there manifested itself in incidents of soiling myself in class and on the playground, not to mention always being the last chosen for playground softball.

The next move, when my father took a teaching job, meant starting 4th grade at yet another school – but perhaps here a fresh start might be possible. The large sandy playground of the earlier school was replaced by a smaller, paved spaced, too small for softball, sparing my daily humiliation. These kids didn't know I had been despised and spurned as a hopeless incompetent. Perhaps I could avoid repeating that role.



The first step in defining my own territory was a hobby – electronics, starting with a crystal set, then radios built from kits, and eventually a ham radio station. My “shack” in the basement gave me refuge, separated from the family above, connected with the outside world (primitively, in Morse code), while the sounds of life on the floors above created the arm's-length comfort of not being alone.

That radio hobby introduced me new sounds from a world beyond. In 1958, I was 11 years old when I started listening to popular music and the first glories of rock & roll. This new music, which our preachers soon started railing against, was all the more attractive because the rest of my family listened only to classical music. (We kids all took piano lessons from my mother, but I dropped out because she didn't know any Little Richard numbers.)

All of which is a long introduction to the moment when I realized that (a) I was not cool, but (b) I wanted to become so. As it happened, I made a friend who helped me figure it out. His name was Al De Wolf, and he was cool. He had an easy way about him, he looked good, and everyone liked him. I reasoned that if I could study him up close, I might learn how to become cool myself.

One day, walking home from school, we reached the point where I normally took another street to my house, but I somehow brazenly persuaded him that it might be fun for me to come home with him. He seemed surprised at the suggestion but then said, “Sure, why not.” From then on, we hung out together after school, and I studied and emulated my subject. We were fond of drawing pictures of the latest cars from Detroit – this was the moment when tail fins reached their apogee. Al had an older brother, 22, who was even cooler – he wore a leather jacket and drove a motorcycle! I reflected that, if you could own a motorcycle at 22, I couldn't see any benefits of ever getting older than that.

Thanks to Al and his brother, I learned to become cool, which I suppose really meant learning how to make oneself more attractive to girls. My school picture from this time shows my hair swept back in the style of Ed “Kookie” Burns in the television show “77

Sunset Strip.” I believe Brylcream was the hair product necessary to maintain this look. It seems to me I also learned to wear my jeans lower on the hips – that was an essential sign of being hip.



The self-transformation seems to have worked, up to a point. In fifth grade, one of the girls in class once told me there were at least four girls who “liked” me. She produced a list of who they were, herself included! At this point, it would be nice to say that a flood of serial romances ensued, but actually, I had no idea what to do next. I recall walking a great distance with a girl of dubious reputation (Rita) all the way to an empty barn on the edge of town, where we settled into a pile of straw. I kissed her on the cheek. She said, “Is that all?” Apparently, it was.

In the end, 5th grade marked my high water mark as a cool dude. It carried me through 6th grade as well, but in 7th grade and the remainder of junior high, the standard for coolness shifted beneath my feet. In our school, it was now all about basketball. As a tall but hopelessly uncoordinated beanstalk, I was not only a failure but a conspicuous one. In 8th grade the coach said, “If you had started practicing in 7th grade, you’d be good today.” I took that to mean that I had missed the boat entirely.

My first moment of triumphant self-invention had come and gone.