Part One

FACING REALITY

1

IDENTITY

"I Am Not Cool"

Janet and I introduce our talk with a simple statement: "You are as cool right now as you will ever be." The students in the young adult discipleship program sitting in the amphitheater before us freeze. Even the pace of surreptitious texting probably drops off. "Right now," we continue, "you are at the very top of the cool curve, and there is only one way to go from there."

A groan rises from the crowd as if from one person.

"We know this in a couple of ways. One of them is that we've met some of your younger brothers and sisters . . . and they don't understand you at all. Your music is nasty, your clothes are weird. And your haircut? Don't get us started. In other words, they already think you're so *over*." Scattered, insincere laughter. "There is another way we know about this: not that long ago, we were you . . . we used to be cool." A muffled gasp. "We wore bell-bottom jeans and worked in coffeehouse ministries the first time—thirty years ago. We used to be cool . . . and now we're not."

Janet and I go on to make the appeal that, because cool shares the shelf life of the average ripe tomato, these students face a hard choice: spend a lifetime pretending their cool remains intact, and along with it their very current cultural knowledge, or realize that a position on the downside of the cool curve creates a fresh opportunity to humble oneself and depend on God. This prospect sobered the young crowd just as it sobers us every day of our ministry lives. Unknowingly, they lived as if their present social identity predicted their future status indefinitely. The two

ancient people perched on chairs in front of them served as proof positive that their unspoken assumption was crumbling by the minute. The students knew by observation that this reality arrived for us long ago; they just never expected the same reality to arrive for them so soon. The news unnerved them, just as it unnerves us, ironically giving us all something we truly share, the first step toward reconciling the generations.

This chapter concerns the need for honesty about the leader's identity, expressed pointedly in the statement, "I am not cool." Facing reality on issues like this makes room for the Holy Spirit to grow humility in us, and it offers an essential prerequisite for involvement in many kinds of reverse mentoring. Conventional wisdom assigns the malady of uncoolness almost exclusively to people my age, as if it were a social analog to near-sightedness or baldness. The fragility of cool, however, means that we *all* experience its erosion at varying rates; there are simply those who can admit it and those who cannot. Hopefully, this chapter makes the admission easier and with it increases the likelihood of seeking out mutually beneficial R-mentoring relationships—because cool matters.

The Physics of Cool

A precise definition of *cool* proves elusive with as many descriptions available as there are those willing to write them. But like gravity, the quality itself seems to possess some known features and predictable effects. Writing about the workings of powerful brands, venture capitalist Guy Kawasaki, for example, identifies four attributes of coolness: "Cool is beautiful. Cool is hip. Cool is idiosyncratic. And cool is contagious."[1] His description is not far off from the findings of marketing studies that have identified similar attributes of cool brands, at least in the perception of young adults.[2] As the brand evangelist for the original Apple Macintosh, Kawasaki is in a position to understand the power of cool. Applying his analysis to the iPhone, then, beauty would

refer to its aesthetic appeal (the simple, uncluttered shape of the device), hipness would relate to its cultural appeal (the sense of being on the leading edge that comes from using the touch screen), idiosyncrasy would refer to its uniqueness (the dissimilarity of the phone from its peers), and contagiousness would relate to market traction as measured by speed of diffusion (hundreds of thousands shipping in the first few months).

Synergy

Even though these four attributes are fairly easy to describe, the mystery of cool seems to happen when someone experiences beauty, hipness, idiosyncrasy, and contagiousness *simultaneously,* as depicted in a simple grid.
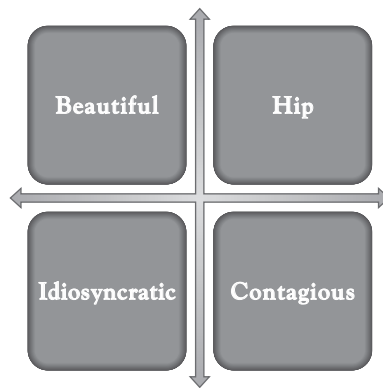
The power of coolness, then, stems in part from a kind of synergy in which the individual elements interact so as to become lost in the overall effect. The aesthetic virtue of an iPod means much less if it lacks uniqueness. Similarly, no amount of hipness compensates for the absence of market appeal in at least some subcultural niche. I suspect this latter factor explains why so many things are cool for such a short period of time.

Finally, nothing is cool until someone says so, because the word itself is by nature and by common usage more of an

observation than an inherent quality. If this were not so, an artist thought to be cool could never lose her appeal, but thousands have met this fate. The synergy of the four elements is very much a socially negotiated reality, as is their opposite: the dreaded state of uncool.

This reversal occurs as well when a style or an artist or even a word goes mainstream and in the process violates the principle of idiosyncrasy (uniqueness). Advising me on the mysteries of communicating with college students in northern California, for instance, my friend Rusty, an experienced student pastor, explained them as exposed to "so many worlds" in culture that they reserved respect only for talks (or other things) they recognized as utterly unique. They preferred their truth served raw, or not at all. An aesthetically pleasing, culturally up-to-date talk that proved contagious elsewhere meant little to them if they sensed even minute "generic" traits. That talk might be true but would never be cool, and cool served as the first filter for credibility.

The relationship among the same four attributes also determines some of the variations of cool that appear. Probably no trend, style, or artist possesses all of these characteristics in exactly equal proportions. Thus cool, which ultimately resides in the eye of the beholder, manifests itself in an infinite number of ways, depending on the balance among its four core qualities. After interviewing hundreds of people who seem cool to me, I have concluded that much of what they evoke in others involves a major dimension, a minor dimension, and two intermediate dimensions.

In other words, they tend to express their coolness through one of the four characteristics more intensely than through the other three. One element tends to be their least intense, and the other two are strung out somewhere in between. So the very popular young worship leader is contagious in a major way because his musical gifts and charismatic personality naturally draw the attention of others. At the same time, he
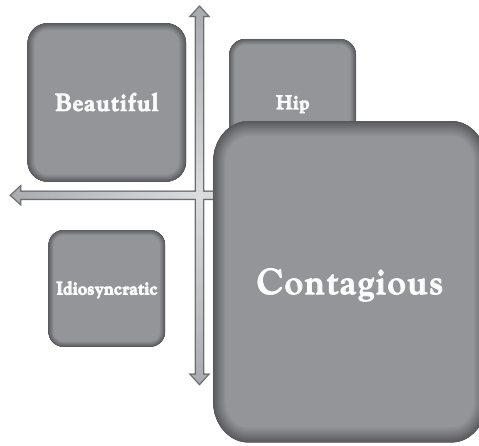
is idiosyncratic in a minor way in that the kind of public persona he represents is readily available in ministries all over the country, on the Internet, and in the Christian music industry. Somewhere in between, in this example, would fall the issues of beauty and hipness. To make this way of thinking about cool more tangible, stop for a moment and place the grid over your own identity as a ministry leader, and ask what might be your major or minor traits. Keep in mind that, because cool exists in the perceptions of others, everyone is cool to someone.

Of course, the number of subtle combinations rapidly approaches the infinite, perhaps suggesting another reason cool seems so easy to spot but so difficult to grasp. Much like "mash-up" art, which combines elements of popular culture to create new forms of expression in video and other media, cool involves more a blend of nuances than a singular idea or style. For example, a panel of experts selected a homemade Superbowl ad—developed at a cost of twelve dollars for the Frito Lay company—as the best advertisement of 2007. The short video literally spawned a thousand imitators and drew four million viewers to a supporting Website.[3] Almost no one could explain in scientific terms why this amateur effort ranked as cool, but four million people can tell you that it does. Experiences like

this are consistent with one survey of young adult consumers that found the most important variable in determining the coolness of a brand came down to something as amorphous as its "personality."[4] This subtlety itself develops into part of the appeal, adding a mystique to a new video or communication device or band that leaves its admirers with only one thing to say: "That's cool."

The impossibility of explaining exactly *why* something or someone is cool stands as the ultimate benchmark. Apple's computer technologies, for example, command a devoted following because of their features, but also because of what their devices *don't* feature—a critical aspect of their uniqueness. Andy Ford, a thirty-five-year-old expert in what the marketing world calls "insight," told me recently that "absence" serves Apple well as a primary value, driving the question, "What can we remove?" in the design of every new box.[5] Regardless of their technical merits, then, Apple's one-button or no-button handheld devices experience little competition (yet) in the coolness category. The message is unmistakable: if Apple's style is this much cooler, its hardware must be that much better.

Fragility

The very power of cool also suggests some of its intrinsic limits. Most obvious among these stands the challenge of transporting one culture's cool to another. With the globalization of the world's marketplace and the daily expansion of the Internet economy, ideas, people, and trends spread across national boundaries like never before. The dissemination of an idea that might have taken many months just two generations ago now occurs in hours, or minutes. Attempts by totalitarian regimes to limit access to the Internet on the part of their citizens indicate the mass ideas can take on when they, like physical objects, travel at high speeds. Cool travels through the same channels, catalyzing global audiences for brands such as

Diesel, musical forms such as hip hop, and media sharing sites such as Flickr.com. Paradoxically, cultures so responsive to hip hop that they begin producing their own version of it simultaneously filter out other ideas and media types. My young friend Joel, for example, warned me one day to get rid of my pleated, cuffed slacks because they fell into the category of "old man pants." At the time, flat front slacks apparently blunted the indignities of age more effectively. Another young leader joked that a meeting of Boomers he attended looked like a "Dockers convention." In this context, an age difference proves sufficient to make things that seemed cool to me untranslatable into the cultural language of my younger peers. The underlying issue, of course, is the association of cool with *new*, an equation that applies to more than clothing, and one that further undermines the permanence of anything or anyone perceived as possessing either.

A second kind of fragility results from the way coolness divides people as much as it unites them. One church visitor thoroughly identifies with the vibe of a Sunday morning experience, while a person in the next row is unmoved, and someone else feels repulsed. To create cool means to create boundaries, regardless of the venue. Pop culture specialist John Weir writes in the introduction to an annual *Catalog of Cool*: "Like America, it's tricky, schizophrenic, both democratic and elite. 'You're cool' means 'you're in,' one of us." But if someone qualifies as in, then someone else by definition remains out.[6] One journalist discovered the force used to defend these borders when she created a profile page on the social networking site Facebook, already the hugely popular Internet community of her teenage daughter's peer group. She received this response after messaging her daughter the first time: "Everyone in the whole world thinks its super creepy when adults have facebooks." Out of this struggle, a not-old mom, who knows technology and family issues well enough to write on them for the *New York Times*, concludes, "Although I feel like the same precocious know-it-all cynic

I always was, I suddenly am surrounded by younger precocious know-it-all cynics whose main purpose appears to be to remind me that I've lost my edge."[7]

To some extent, then, cool as a feature of social groups constitutes a fraternity with fairly strict admission requirements screening out some (often older) people at least on some issues. The kinds of identity that depend on the circle of cool also depend on keeping the circle intact. If everyone is cool, no one is, and so the more intense the cool factor, the smaller the circle, creating the paradox of admirers unable to become imitators, like the throngs of fans singing along with Bono at a U2 concert but more likely to be struck by a meteorite than to become a rock star themselves. Closer to home sits the church member present on Sunday out of admiration for the pastor's oratory, yet struggling through a desperate life, untransformed by the thirty-minute talking cure the minister presents each week.

A third limitation on the phenomenon of cool stems from the paradox that real cool requires some degree of unawareness, what Weir refers to as an "unconscious grace." He goes on to lament that, after starting on the edges of culture in venues such as the jazz music scene of the 1930s and then the early days of rock and roll in the 1950s, cool found such a place in the mainstream that: "Our country is committed to an economy of cool. . . . Now it's used to sell stuff. Cars, music, blue jeans, underarm deodorant: turn on the television, everything's cool. Every prime-time star and talk-show guest, dressed in black, void of body fat, confessing a passion for guitar bands and underdog ball clubs, is totally cool. . . ."[8]

A strong proof of this observation takes the form of the cottage industry developing to help both companies and nonprofits find and maintain the cool factor in their brands and organizations. In the mid-1990s, for instance, then-dominant America Online (AOL) hired Kathy Ryan to serve as the "VP of Cool," heading up a "Cool Team" tasked with developing the kind of sites needed to keep AOL on the front edge of Web innovation.[9]

Fast Company featured Ryan in the magazine's very first issue. But today, AOL's customer base is one-third of what it was at the beginning of this century. An Internet-based trend-watching firm offers another approach, called "Cool School," designed to offer "a complete immersion into the entertainment, brands, and activities that are shaping the lives of young people at the moment." For a fee, the student digests such experiences as creating a Facebook profile, being massacred by sixteen-year-olds playing the Halo 3 video game, shopping in high-end boutiques, visiting a "secret" restaurant, or socializing in a hipster club. In spite of this variety, the materials presented change constantly because cool is a moving target.[10]

Aware that their organizations live or die according to something as quixotic as the "personality" of a wristwatch or soft drink, business enterprises use cool as a marketing tactic. In their first half of 2007, the top ten prime-time televisions programs in the United States served as the platform for seventeen thousand product placements. Whenever the camera zooms in on the watch worn by a young superhero until the logo comes into focus, a corporation positions its brand as cool by associating with media personalities perceived as representing the trait. But a dilemma results: as with humility, no sooner do I become aware of cool than it changes into something else, something more like a style that I put on to present myself in a certain way. I sometimes meet leaders my age at conferences dressed in dark clothing, freeze-frame hairstyles, and long-strapped messenger bags mimicking the look of Midwestern young adults. On a twenty-year-old, those artifacts seem native and natural (even though short-lived), but on my peers they seem like affectations, fashions designed to do for our image what Botox is supposed to do for our faces. Leaders using icons of coolness for personal marketing feel "with it," but to others they resemble aging celebrities victimized by too many self-inflicted plastic surgeries. As the effort to achieve a certain look overshadows the reason for looking that way, the fragility of cool catches up with them.

The Marketplace of Cool

The concept of cool, rooted in the twentieth century, persists into the twenty-first perhaps with even greater strength drawn from the dominance of pop and business cultures. The former revels in cool as a core element of personal identity and group cohesion, while the latter uses it as part of marketing strategies designed to associate goods and services with the vibe found in pop culture. Documentary filmmaker Douglas Rushkoff points out in *Merchants of Cool* that a symbiotic relationship between the pop and corporate sectors entices teens and young adults to think of themselves as the architects of cultural icons that actually originate out of marketing research done by huge con-glomerates.[11] Specifically, he depicts a very successful campaign to sell Sprite as the product of a carefully orchestrated covert arrangement involving the media companies producing hip hop, Coca Cola, and marketing firms who study how products catch on among teenagers. For Rushkoff, cool is owned, used, and sold by corporate powerbrokers. Having originated on the margins of culture, this experience has become a tactic of the power-ful, a "best practice" of business leaders. Cool is now a product *itself*, with a global reach and market cachet. The culture of cool depends first and foremost on the commodification of its pri-mary ingredient. Just as in pop culture, where nothing is cool until someone says so, in the marketing arena millions of dollars are spent on elaborate campaigns to persuade someone to do just that. Sprite is not the real product; cool is.

It comes as little surprise, then, that the value placed on this sort of mystique persists among us as other, related notions come and go. Lucas Conley, writing for *Fast Company*, graphically depicts the dominance of *cool* as an adjective, compared to other terms competing in the brutal marketplace of pop culture.[12]

Recent and doubtless short-lived updates to Conley's chart (*sick, hot, nice*), some of which receded into history long ago in certain parts of the country, only make the remarkable staying power of *cool* more dramatic.
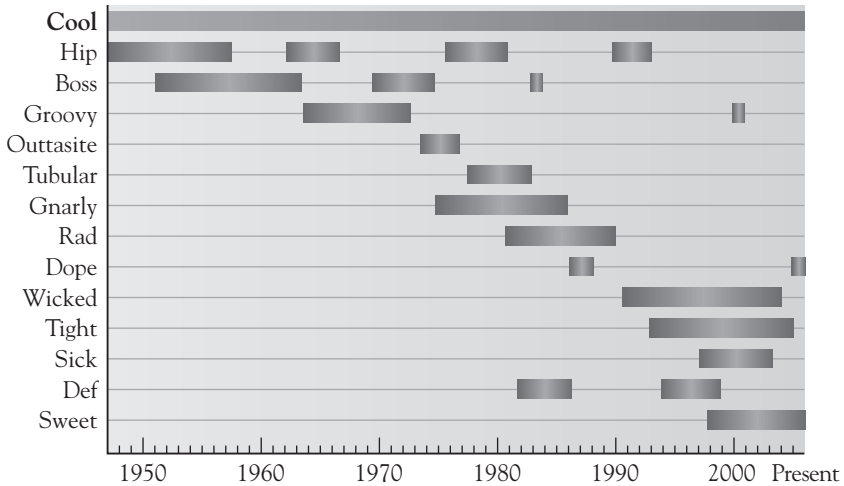
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The permanence of cool as both a unique vibe and a marketable commodity simply exceeds the ability of older leaders to emulate it on either level. Like stockholders in a company going under, we possess symbols (stock certificates) that once held value for good reason, but ink dried up on paper means nothing unless it represents a profitable enterprise. As we age, our cool simply goes out of business a day at a time. The pattern does not fall along neat generational lines. One young friend who works with teenagers described herself as positioned "in that weird gap between the two generations . . . it's tricky sometimes because there are times when I feel really old and separated from my students and times when I feel like I know what's going on . . . and other times when I just don't get the way they think!" From this gap, building a bridge to a distant ninth grader meant using the animated television program *The Simpsons* as the common ground. Another friend interviewing a nineteen-year-old for a class project, received a poignant account of his journey away from faith and then reflected in an e-mail to me: "i am learning about track and field trip hop (i hope i got that right),

realizing that i need to become more technically proficient with a macbook pro (you should see what he's done with imovie, garageband, and iphoto), and wanting to be a good friend/big sister to a generation that is half my age. (yikes!!! when did THAT happen??) so fun. really—SO INCREDIBLY FUN and humbling and engaging and eye-opening."

These ministry leaders, both about half my age, already feel the pressure. Perhaps the erosion of cool accelerates with each year, but even if not, leaders must prepare to say the dreaded words "I am not cool" at younger and younger ages.

This drop in market value (easily recognized by veterans of the experience) came into high relief for Janet and me during a coffee meeting with a brother and sister, Katie and Josh, and their father, Gary, a friend and fellow minister. Almost right away, the subject of tension between Xers (born 1965–1976) and Millennials (born 1977–2002)[13] somehow arose. Intrigued by this seldom-discussed issue, we started asking questions. Katie (an Xer) immediately commented that she and Josh experienced this decaying market position and the resulting generational stress in four very real ways:

1. The beauty gap: Katie felt the impact of the rift when she coached cheerleaders at a university: "I found out that I was not cool." At one point, the younger girls even approached her with an unthinkable question: "Can we do your makeup for you?" These Millennial girls (only a few years her junior) preferred a different, more recently developed style and possessed the self-confidence to coach the coach on the aesthetic dimension of coolness.

2. The contagion gap: Katie surprised me when she noted that Xers resent not being young anymore but feel bereft of adult options at the same time: "I'm twenty-eight and I still don't know what I want to do with my life." Meanwhile, her younger peers seem to feel ready to conquer the world, making it over in their image. Commenting on the sense of

rejection of Xers by Boomers, Katie concluded flatly, "We're not likeable."

3. The hipness gap: Janet and I grew up with television, and Josh and Katie are products of the computer age, but our Millennial friends are creatures of the Internet. Those three experiences are, of course, related, but the older the group the more commonly they feel technologically behind the times. For example, as Katie pointed out, "You guys [meaning Janet and I] had to tell us about MySpace." That's just not hip.

4. The uniqueness gap: with their numbers approaching eighty million and teenagers alone spending almost $130 billion annually, Millennials attract marketing attention the way the sun attracts planets,[14] widening the fissure between the generations. From Josh and Katie's perspective, the church (and culture in general) reaches out to the Millennials but overlooks the smaller Generation X because it's "so easy to get excited about the new person." Katie concluded wistfully, "We are still the stuck generation."

On one level, Josh and Katie's words represented a case study in how each dimension of cool also presents a way to lose it, meaning that uncool also takes many forms and expresses many subtleties sometimes difficult to put into words. These friends find themselves not so much behind technologically as culturally disenfranchised by the pressure they feel from a bigger, more confident Millennial tribe. The perception of declining value in the market of cool (although they still seem cool to us) symbolizes a journey that all leaders take eventually. The question is whether or not they can admit it.

Grace and Courage

The dark interior of the Kansas City steak house felt like the setting for a low-budget gangster film. I arrived for dinner carrying

my almost-new smart phone (really a tiny computer that just happened to make calls) in a black vinyl case clipped to my belt. The case seemed like such a great idea: it freed my hands while carrying the phone, protected the device from harm, and kept it handy for calls. That is, until my friends Justin and Dan saw me carrying it that way and began laughing. They actually owned the identical device but would never dream of using the black plastic case that snapped shut. Their issue was not some flaw in the case design (it worked just fine) but the fact that using a case like this failed the cool test.

Hopes of reinvigorating my own cool by displaying the latest (at the time) phone technology seemed well founded at first. Only a few months earlier, hadn't I handed the box to an admiring Millennial who asked to look at the device so he could see it up close? But that was the phone itself. The presence of the case revealed my pathetic attempt to parlay a small box of electronics into a twenty-first-century identity. The reasons to hate the case seemed somewhat murky, but I sensed they arose from the pointlessness of protecting hardware rendered basically disposable by rapid technological change. Wearing the case at the beltline furnished even more entertainment for my friends, perhaps because of its association with the corporate casual style of dress popular among Boomers. Dan and Justin illustrated their point by citing an acquaintance who wore so many devices around his middle that they referred to him as sporting (like Batman) a "utility belt." Before our steaks arrived, I unclipped my case, removed the phone, and handed the case to my two mentors, part of the same group that had taught me to text message just a few years before. They accepted it as a token of surrender. Handing it over did not make me cool; it just presented a formal admission that I am not.

Saying "I am not cool" out loud hurts. If you don't believe me, try it right now. One reason very familiar to older leaders appeared in a blog by John Marshall, a sixth-generation minister, pastor of a large Baptist church, and friend: "I'm about to

leave to go learn more at the conference for pastors under forty. I still feel nineteen, until I look in a mirror, and then I wonder who that guy is looking at me. I grew up in a world where the older always mentored the younger. The reverse seems to be happening these days."[15]

Admitting that my youth is behind me forms the first step in the process of acknowledging my lack of cool and blunts the pain of saying it the first time. Part of that pain issues from the fact that older leaders never received any preparation for the importance of cool as an issue or their inevitable decline in this market. Age and experience alone were supposed to guarantee a following, but it turns out that the beauty, hipness, uniqueness, and contagiousness we once assumed can be counted on no longer. Trying to bluff by dressing or acting differently only makes things worse.

Fortunately, a better option probably sits next to you at a meeting: a younger person or some other brand of unlikely friend who possesses both the knowledge you need and the willingness to share it. That person also needs the experience and wisdom you have to offer. It is not necessary to be cool or young to lead. It *is* necessary to have the grace to admit it when you are not.