

**TO MY GRANDSONS: COOL ISN'T COOL. GOD, COUNTRY AND FAMILY ARE**

To Zachary and Nicholas Wansley, Brian and Thomas Yarbrough:

It has become tradition to write you guys at the first of the year and lay a little unsolicited advice on you. I've never asked what, if anything, you do with these pearls of wisdom. Perhaps it is best that I not know. I do know that I have lived a long life with a lot of ups and downs in it. Maybe something I say will allow you to experience more of the ups and less of the downs in your own life. I hope so.

It is hard to believe that by the end of 2006, two of you will be college students, one will be a senior in high school, and another a sophomore. Three of you will be eligible to vote in the upcoming elections. Imagine that. You get to help select who will be the next governor of Georgia, as well as a number of other state and local offices. Having the right to vote is something that most of the rest of us, unfortunately, take for granted. Only about half the eligible voters in Georgia even bother to vote. Voting is a singular privilege, and you must take this responsibility very seriously. If you ever choose not to vote in any election from presidential to local dogcatcher, don't let me know. Your great-grandparents considered not voting a sin of biblical proportions. So do I.

I hope you appreciate how blessed you are to live in the United States of America. Ignore the naysayers who are so eager to tell us what is wrong with our country. Granted, we are not perfect, but I have yet to have anyone tell me of a single spot on earth that is better. Dissent comes with democracy, but that doesn't mean that we can't love our country with great passion. Respect the flag, and pledge allegiance to it with enthusiasm. Take off your hat when the national anthem is being played and stand at attention. There is nothing wrong with being patriotic.

Believe in God. He is real, but don't confuse faith with ritual, because ritual is the human mind presuming how God wants us to worship. Being faithful to God has nothing to do with what gender is in the pulpit or whether or not we ingest wheat wafers or double-chocolate Oreos with our communion. That is just people saying their way is the right way to worship. They are wrong. God is bigger than mere mortals' interpretations of him. That's good news.

I know that at your age being cool is important, and you probably think that being cool means not showing emotion. That's not cool. Strong, self-confident people have no problem expressing their feelings openly. I have said this before, and I will continue to say it: Don't let a day go by without telling your parents that you love them. Your parents have earned your love and respect. Show it. Same with your grandparents. There is no guarantee that any of us will be around even tomorrow. We all love you very much. We know you love us, too, but it would be nice to hear it from your lips every once in a while. You are all equipped with the latest in technological gizmos, so there is no excuse not to call occasionally and let us know how you are doing. I believe I speak for all of your grandparents in saying there is no detail too arcane to share. We just enjoy hearing the sound of your voice.

Finally, remember not to sweat the small stuff in this world, and as you are no doubt learning, there is a lot of small stuff around. This has been a difficult lesson for your grandfather to learn, and I'm not sure I've learned it yet. What I need to remember in the autumn of my years is to be grateful for the big stuff. You guys are definitely big stuff, and you have blessed me beyond words. Stay well, and do great deeds.

Happy New Year,

Pa