

September 21, 2008

My name is Ken Yarbrough. I'm writing this week because my father, the wordsmith that you've come to expect in this space, is taking a sabbatical.

You see, his oldest grandson died recently, and as you might expect, he's taking it hard. Please forgive me for presuming that I can capably fill in for him, which I can't. What I can do, though, is to attempt to offer a eulogy to Zack, which my father may never be able to do.

If you are a faithful reader, you know of my Dad's love for his grandsons. In this space over the years, he has chronicled their development from boys to men, and through them has pointed out to readers the value that he puts on family.

Zachary Earl Wansley was born a little over 21 years ago at Piedmont Hospital in Atlanta. At the same time, the world became a different place because Jane and Dick Yarbrough became forever known as Grandma and Pa, just as Marie and Jerry Wansley became Grammy and Granddad. Three more grandsons were to follow, Zachary's brother Nicholas as well as my two sons, Brian and Thomas. But Zack was the first, the first to school, the first to drive a car, and the first to college. Many of you may remember reading in this space the advice that "Pa" offered to his grandsons about cars, college, and the world in general. I know I do.

When I was growing up in his house, the grandfatherly advice that you have read here were delivered as lectures to his children, some so frequently that I cataloged them. When I was a teenager and Dad started to deliver his finest oratory on safe driving, I would interrupt him with "I know this one, Dad. It's number 62. I'll be careful." What a time saver! What I didn't realize until later was that the lectures were more than just advice; they were also an expression of Dad's love.

My family is a loving group and for this reason the loss of Zack is devastating. My own son Brian expressed what we all feel when he remarked about the unfairness of Zack being taken from us when he was just about to embark on a life that was certain to be successful and full of meaning. I've thought long and hard about what he said, and I'm incapable of offering an explanation. Instead, I keep coming back to that word: love. As a high school teacher, I'm surrounded by teenagers all day every day. It is to them and every other young person that I say: Somebody loves you. I wonder today how many young people left their house with a door slam, a squeal of tires or a muttered curse. What if that was the last memory of them?

I'm fairly certain that Zack's grieving mom and dad -- my sister Maribeth and her husband -- Ted have as a last memory the happy voice of Zack, a young man raised in a family of love. I know that I have heard the lecture from my dad before; I just can't remember the catalog number. But the advice contained in it is simple. Live each moment as if it is your last. Leave each person you contact with the feeling that you just made their world a better place. Then, when your time comes, as it did tragically too soon for Zack, you have left a legacy of love. Goodness knows we could all use a little more. If a few people try to live their life differently, then maybe, just maybe, I can explain how Zack being taken from us in the prime of life could be made into something good.

Give someone a hug today, and think of Zachary Earl Wansley. He made the world a better place by being here.

Zack, I love you.

Uncle Ken