

January 12, 2009

TO MY GRANDSONS: LIVE YOUR LIFE AS ZACK LIVED HIS

To Nicholas Wansley; Brian and Thomas Yarbrough:

This is my ninth year to dispense some grandfatherly advice to you at the beginning of a new year. Things have certainly changed since I began this correspondence. Not only have you gone from pre-teens to adults during that time, including one newly minted father among you. We have also lost your brother and cousin, Zack, who died in September doing what he loved — running.

Zack's passing has given your grandfather a major dose of humility — something, frankly, that has been sorely lacking in the old man. I had assumed that if I accumulated enough money and enough influence, I could pretty much manage anything life could throw at me. How wrong I was. Zack's death showed me how hard life can be and how little I can do about it.

Along with you, I wonder how this can possibly be a better world without Zack's perpetually sunny disposition and enthusiasm when it is overflowing with so many slugs, ingrates, cranks, loudmouths, whiners, self-absorbed narcissists and just plain jerks who do little more than occupy time and space. Sorry, but I don't have an answer for that one.

We never talk religion, so I don't know what you think or believe. I only know I believe in God as much now as I did before the tragedy and accept that it is not my place to judge what has happened. That is surprising because, frankly, I expected to be a lot angrier than I am. Maybe I am just numb, or maybe my faith is stronger than I realized.

Our shared tragedy should serve as a vivid reminder that we had better live this day as though it will be the last one any of us ever spends on earth, because it well could be. The Bible says, "Do not worry about tomorrow; for tomorrow will take care of itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own." I am ashamed to tell you how many precious days of my life have been wasted, fretting over things that had happened to me yesterday or agonizing over what I thought would happen tomorrow, not realizing that I couldn't change yesterday or predict tomorrow. I missed a lot of todays I can never get back. Please don't let that happen to you.

One of the things I am trying to do is to keep things in better perspective. It is difficult, given what we have been through, but I still have each of you to love, as well as your parents, your grandmother, a new great-grandson and more friends than I deserve. You have similar opportunities. There are a lot of people and things to love in this world if you take the time to look for them.

I have discovered that so many people in this world have suffered enormous tragedies and have survived. That should give us courage. I can't tell you the number of readers who have described their own personal losses — sometimes multiple losses — and how they coped. To a person, they say our greatest ally is the passage of time. There will come a day, believe it or not, when the hurt will abate and we will be left with wonderful memories of a wonderful person.

In the meantime, life goes on. How you choose to live it will be up to you. Please try to make this world better for having been here. You don't have to do big things; the small gestures are just as important. Have integrity and a good value system, and never lie. Appreciate nature and all that it contains. Be positive. Laugh a lot. Make friends, not enemies. Find good in everything and everybody. Never let the sun set on a day in which you have not done your very best. Remember, that was how Zack lived his too-short life. I pray you will follow his example. We owe him that.

And for God's sake, please be careful and remember that you aren't invincible. I don't ever want to go through this again.

Love,
Pa