



What We Want Our Grandchildren to Know

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The editors of *Word & World* asked us to write this article on “What We Want Our Grandchildren to Know.” Since we have no grandchildren this assignment required some imagination on our part. To be as personal and direct as possible we have chosen to express our thoughts in the form of a letter written to the grandchildren we may have some day.

Dear Grandchildren,

There are things so important to us that we want you to know them too. In this letter we want to tell you about some of the central convictions and values of our lives. Times will change and we hope they will change for the better. We also believe in some abiding realities that have sustained us and we hope these will also sustain and guide you.

As we begin to write this letter, grandparents’ faces look out at us from a picture on the wall. We wish that we could read a letter telling their thoughts and hopes and dreams for us. What we wish they had written for us, we will now attempt to write for you.

Please do not regard these thoughts as a complete and final statement of your grandparents’ perspectives and convictions. Like yourselves, we are involved in a dynamic pilgrimage of living and learning, changing and growing. We may never have the privilege of knowing each other personally but we hope that the words we share will be a kind of bridge spanning time and space, enabling us to meet each other, and that in our meeting there will be an exchange of love and understanding between us.

Here then is a list and brief description of some things we hope you will come to know and experience in your adventure of living.

The Heart of the Universe is Warm

This world can seem a cold and careless place. There are times when we feel terribly alone and that no one understands or cares for us. Selfish and

senseless cruelties abound. Joy and suffering seem unjustly distributed within the human family. Even nature speaks with doubled voice, telling in one moment of both the incredible beauty of a glorious sunrise and of parched fields, drought and famine that follow upon that same sun’s shining without rain.

Yet, there was born into this world a person in whom we believe the heart of the universe has been revealed to be warm with caring love. It is not easy to believe in a God of love in a

world like this, but Jesus invites and, we believe, even enables us to live with that trust. In all he said and did Jesus tells us that God loves each of us even more than we love ourselves, and that nothing we have ever done or can ever do will stop God from loving us. In Jesus we see a God who is for us, who wills to bless us and who wants to give joy and meaning to every person.

When we were young it sometimes seemed that people who talked about Jesus didn't care much for joy and fullness of life. Some of their rules and regulations seemed intended to keep us from having fun. Now we see that, at their best, those teachings were intended to keep us from getting hurt and that the God revealed in Jesus is always on the side of life, working for our true happiness even more than we want it for ourselves.

If God is for us and for life in fullness for all people everywhere, God is also against everything that seeks to degrade and destroy our lives. When you are angry at the world's evil and want to rid the earth of all its senseless suffering, remember that God is angry too and is eager to work with you to make the world a place of greater joy. Therefore, in gladness and in grief remember Jesus and dare to trust that the heart of the universe is warm and that your life is held by a love that will never let you go. Rest in God's love.

Our Greatest Capacity

It is often said that mental ability is the highest quality of a human being. Intelligence is a great gift but we believe that we have an even greater endowment—the capacity for receiving and giving love.

Computers have capacity for memory and calculation far greater than our own but they cannot love. Only God and human beings, who are created in God's image, can love and be loved. When all is said and done, our lives do not consist in our wizardry, achievements or possessions but in being loved and in loving others.

Beyond the love of God, the most important reality in our lives is the people whose love we need and who need our love. It is a great temptation to love things and to use people, but it is people who are to be loved and things that are to be used. In the long run there is only sorrow in using others or in letting others use us. Be open to receive the love of those who truly care for you but beware of pseudo-love that would only use you. Be open to give yourself in caring love to others but also beware of the pseudo-love in your own heart that would only use them.

Love is risking. To love is to be vulnerable. When we love we open our lives to the pains of intimacy and to the sorrow that comes at the inevitable ending of all our relationships. Nevertheless, take the risk! In the security of God's

love dare to be vulnerable. Open your lives to give and to receive love with thankful hearts. Don't live life holding back. Risk the joy and the pain of loving and being loved.

Our lives have been enriched by receiving and sharing love within the wider family of the Christian community. We hope that you, too, will find a home in a caring congregation where you will be affirmed and guided by people whose lives, though imperfect, reflect something of the compassion and truth of Jesus. Such persons have been nothing less than means of grace to us. Give yourself a chance to be part of a family like that.

Two Ways of Living

W. H. Auden believed that the most profound thought ever uttered is the statement of Jesus in Luke 9:24 that those who seek to save their lives will lose them while those who lose their lives for Jesus' sake will save them. There are essentially only two ways to live. One way is self-saving—selfish, self-seeking, greedy and always grasping after more for oneself. The other way is self-losing—self-giving, self-forgetful, caring, sharing and serving others.

Jesus really invites us to give ourselves away: first, in trust to the love of God and then with love to the lives of other people. He says, in effect, that this is how we are designed to live and that we don't live fully in any other way. An uncle liked to say that "the teachings of Jesus are not true because Jesus said them; Jesus said them because they are true." Jesus' words in Luke 9:24 reveal a basic and profound fact of life which we have found true in both the regret and joy of our own experience. We have found that excessive self-preoccupation, for example, prompts a voice within that seems to say "This is not it. This is not the life we were designed to live." But, when we have trusted God's love and forgotten about ourselves while caring for someone else, that voice within has seemed to say, "This is more like it. This has the touch and taste of life upon it."

It has been said that "humility is not thinking less of ourselves than of other people; it is not thinking of ourselves one way or the other at all." In inviting us to this way of life Jesus does not advocate a "poor me, I'm no good for anything" kind of attitude. We hope that you will be so secure in God's love and so grateful for all the good gifts God has given you that you won't be bothered with excessive self-preoccupation and self-seeking but will instead be free to lose, and to find, your life in an adventure of thankful trust and joyful love.

Rejoice in Your Gifts

God has given each of us enough ability to do the work we are created to do. There are many things we cannot do. Even if we had taken lessons for years, neither of us could have sung in the Metropolitan Opera. It would have been futile for us to pursue operatic careers. We all have limitations and it is well to face them, and when they stand in the way of the fulfillment of a proper goal to seek help in overcoming them. But having done that, we need to focus more on our abilities than our limitations. We believe that God calls us through our gifts and through our interest in doing things we like to do. We are often challenged

to complete unpleasant tasks and there is some drudgery in the most appealing vocation, but we don't believe that God wants us to be miserable in our work. With the conviction that God is on the side of life, we also believe that we are especially challenged to follow our gifts and interests into vocations, and avocations, that we expect to enjoy. Someone has even suggested that we may be called to account for all the proper pleasures we have failed to enjoy.

Stand for Something Great

Among our abilities is what Harry Emerson Fosdick called "our representative capacity." He liked to say that "we don't need to be great in ourselves to stand for something great." He illustrated that capacity by pointing to an ordinary person carrying the colors of a great country. Our greatness does not reside in our gifts alone but in the greatness we choose to represent.

Therefore, we hope that you will be captured by some great and good causes that are much bigger than the fulfillment of your own short-term, self interests. We need many little causes and the satisfaction of fulfilling purposes we can bring to completion, but we also need commitment to one or two great causes that may never be fulfilled in our lifetimes. We thank God, for example, for those who worked for abolition of slavery, for equal rights for persons of all races and for full equality between men and women, even when success was beyond their reach. Politics has often been described as “the art of the possible” but the Scandinavian statesman Edvard Hambro reveals a greater truth when he says that “politics is the art of making possible tomorrow what seems impossible today.” That truth applies to the work and witness of each of our lives as well as to politics. We are to strive to create a more just and peaceful world tomorrow even when it seems impossible today. When tempted to give up in the face of overwhelming personal and global problems, we take heart from the promise of the apostle Paul in Corinthians 15:58. That chapter proclaims the victory of resurrection unto eternal life and at the end Paul says, “Therefore.” He could have said, “Therefore, rejoice” or even “Therefore, stop working and dream of heaven” but that is not what he says. Paul says, “Therefore, my beloved...be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.” When we work for the fulfillment of the purposes of love and justice that we see in Jesus, we are assured that our labors count for time and for eternity. Therefore, use your representative capacity to carry the colors of Christ.

The Location of Evil

We are often tempted to live as if all the world’s evil resided in others and none in ourselves. There may also be times when we tend to blame ourselves for everything that goes wrong and to regard others as perfect. We believe that both perspectives are wrong and that none of us has a monopoly on either vice or virtue.

Most of us are probably better at seeing and confessing the sins of others than we are at recognizing and acknowledging our own faults and failures. We

tend to judge ourselves by our motives and others by their actions. Since we mean well, it is easy to believe that we are also doing well and that is not necessarily true. As loving parents, for example, who only want the best for our children, we still make many mistakes in our life together. It is true that “Love covers a multitude of sins” but even love alone is not enough. We also need the understanding and wisdom to act in ways that build up rather than tear down.

When tempted to blame all our troubles on someone else, it is well to remember the wise saying, “It is difficult to condemn evil in others without increasing the evil in ourselves.” We are certainly not to condone evil in anyone. We are to stand against everything that is life degrading, but we will do so more wisely and compassionately when we remember that some of the world’s evil is also located in ourselves.

We also believe that it is wrong for us to blame all of the world’s (or even all of our own) troubles on ourselves. We suffer from the sins of others just as they suffer because of ours. It is probably about as difficult for us to be all wrong as it is for us to be all right. We may have blind spots that obscure our virtues as well as those that hide our vices. True humility, as we have already noted, is not self-depreciation but self-forgetfulness. There may be as much perverse

pride in continually thinking about our worthlessness as in always thinking of our perfection.

We will not go so far as to say that we are all equally evil and equally virtuous, but we may be more alike than we often believe. Some of our sins are ugly and obvious while others are beautifully adorned and disguised. Some virtues may be offensive and vices appealing. God, who alone knows the secrets of our hearts and the consequences of our attitudes and actions, will be our final judge. In the meantime, Jesus reminds us in John 8:7 that only those who are without sin are to cast stones of condemnation against others. He teaches that we are to be merciful toward others, and toward ourselves, as God is merciful toward us.

Catch the Right Bus

Another of Fosdick's favorite illustrations was of a man who boarded a bus intending to go to Detroit but after a long day's journey he found himself not in Detroit but in Kansas City. He had caught the wrong bus. That story reminds us of the fact that the destinations to which we come in life are not determined by our desires alone but by the roads we travel. Just as good intentions do not keep us from hurting others, they also do not guarantee that we will arrive at happiness for ourselves. Among life's saddest stories are those of people who in one way or another have caught the wrong bus. Nobody, for example, ever intends to get lung cancer or emphysema, but many, after years of cigarette smoking, arrive at that deadly destination. No one desires to become an alcoholic or drug addict but millions travel the road of self-medication that brings them to that misery.

A fantasy is told of a teenager who was invited to go to a certain place to meet a very important person. That person turned out to be the man or woman he or she would be at age 40. As God gives you life, you will one day meet

yourself at 40! The roads you are traveling today will, in significant measure, determine the amount of gratitude or regret you will experience in such encounters with yourself at the beginning of every decade for the rest of your life.

We have lived long enough to observe that communities and nations as well as individuals can catch the wrong bus. Although there are notable exceptions, we believe that most of our leaders have been sincere in desiring the best for their people. But such noble intention has not always kept them from catching the wrong bus. Desiring prosperity they have sometimes traveled roads that plunged an entire nation into economic adversity. Leaders sincerely committed to peace have often acted in ways that led to war. Therefore, we encourage you to question the policies as well as the motives of all your leaders, and to beware of being brainwashed by well-intentioned people who are among the most dangerous participants in what has been called the march of folly. Do not give unquestioned obedience to any authority. Study the pros and cons of every issue for yourself. Become involved intellectually and practically in government at all levels. Lend your influence to the development of the policies of your community, church and nation. Don't just sit as an observer on the sideline of life. Live as an active participant in the political process and as you do, pay continual heed to the signs on the front of the buses you are tempted to ride. Be sure, not only of your goals, but of the roads you are traveling, for in choosing your roads you are also choosing the destinations at which you will one day arrive.

Things Worth Doing Poorly

There is much, but not all, truth in the old saying that “anything worth doing is worth doing well.” To avoid living under the tyranny of perfectionism and in slavery to impossible ideals, it is well to remember that there are some things worth doing that are worth doing poorly. Those who are careless or indifferent to the quality of their work need to be reminded of the worth of doing things well. Others who are obsessive, compulsive perfectionists need to be reminded of the worth of doing some things poorly. Limits of time and ability often make perfection impossible. Few of us, for example, will ever perform on the concert stage or become stars as professional athletes, but that should not stop us from learning to play the piano or from playing on the second-string basketball team. None of us has either the gifts or the time to do all things well. It is not necessary for us to receive prolonged instruction from a golf or tennis pro before we can enjoy the game. A recent college graduate told of having received a “D” in a course that transformed his life. He did poorly in that class but was still deeply grateful for having taken it.

After a few years’ experience we might approach perfection in the art of shoveling sand but no such perfection is possible in the complex and difficult business of dealing with people in personal relationships and on the job. In such, and similar, work we need an abundance of what someone has called “the courage of imperfection” and frequently discover that there are many things that we do best when we don’t try to do them perfectly. Performance anxiety, as well as carelessness, can undermine the quality of our work. Strive for excellence in all things worth doing well but also live with a proper courage of im-

perfection. That is not an excuse for irresponsible mediocrity but it is sometimes necessary for our sanity and survival.

Living as Equals

The human story abounds with blatant atrocities and subtle injustices that have resulted from discrimination based on differences of race, class and sex. Many of these have been committed by Christians who have failed to live in harmony with the fact that in Christ “there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female” (Gal 3:28). In the sight of God, racial, economic and sexual differences do not count in determining a person’s worth. Since that is true for God, we believe it should also be true for us.

We are grateful for signs of hope that discriminatory attitudes are being overcome, but they are still far too prevalent among us and, often unwittingly, within us. Racial minorities, poor people, and women do not yet have full equality in our society. We hope that your generation will have overcome these injustices far better than our own.

While we have not been able to affirm everything (such as unlimited abortion rights) that has been advocated in the name of women’s liberation, we believe that the movement for full equality of men and women is essentially correct and long overdue. We deplore the use of Biblical texts, which may have provided helpful pastoral counsel in racist and male-dominated societies, to bless continued racism and sexism. We are especially disturbed by those who attempt to offer Biblical support for male dominance in marriage. As equals in Christ, we believe that God wills the full development and utilization of all of our gifts. Therefore, we do not

believe that the husband should always rule as the intellectual head of the house while the wife retains a submissive role as the emotional heart of the house. Head and heart are human, and not just male and female, characteristics. Wives have brains and husbands have emotions and we do not believe that God wills the suppression of these gifts in either sex. Full equality affirms both in every person.

A Legacy of Abomination

We believe that humanity has made great progress. Medicine, for example, is vastly better today than in our childhood. Smallpox, which is reported to have once killed one-fifth of the human race, has been virtually eliminated from the earth. Polio, which was dreaded in our youth, can now be easily prevented. Systems of communication and transportation that we take for granted would have seemed startling if not miraculous to our grandparents. Life in much of the world is clearly better than it was 50 years ago.

These achievements are, however, offset by equally immense failures, two of which seem especially appalling to us and which leave a legacy of abomination from our generation to yours. One of these is the unequal and unjust distribution of the goods of the earth, and the other is humanity's continued reliance upon violence and war as the ultimate means for resolution of conflict.

These are immensely complex and difficult problems with which we cannot deal in depth in this brief letter, but we want you to know that we are deeply concerned and troubled over them.

We do not believe in tyrannical communism, which has been described as a Christian heresy, but we do believe that there is something profoundly Christian and Biblical about the idea that each person is to give according to ability and to receive according to need. In Christ we are not owners of anything but are stewards, trustees and managers commissioned to share and to serve with the kind of love we see in Jesus.

The longer we live the deeper our conviction becomes that one of the most tragic errors of Christianity has been its acceptance and frequent blessing of the use of violence and warfare, sometimes even in the name of Christ. We believe that there may be tragic exceptional circumstances in which the taking of life is justifiable and that there is need for limited, responsible police power in a sinful world. But we do not believe that anything justifies the current militarization of the planet and present development of doomsday weapons that threaten to destroy everyone and everything they are supposed to defend. Therefore, we stand strongly opposed to every institutionalized and established practice of violence such as capital punishment, and especially against war and warmaking as acceptable means for the resolution of international conflict.

We do not believe that it is possible, or even desirable, to eliminate all conflict. But we also believe that there are non-violent means for the resolution of conflict and that these are expressed and illustrated in the teaching and example of Jesus. In Jesus we see that we are called to be stewards not only of our personal time, abilities, and money, but also of the very life of this planet which so far as we now know may be the only thinking, dreaming, hoping, praying life in all of God's vast creation. Jesus says, "No more of this!" (Luke 22:51) to the use of the sword and calls us to be "peacemakers" (Matt 5:9) and not just peace lovers or peace keepers. As

peacemakers, we believe that we are (1) to resolve our conflicts through reconciliation and negotiation rather than through violence, (2) to live with a global rather than narrow tribal or national perspective, and from that perspective to work for the creation of a global, rather than only national, security system, and (3) to live the way of the cross rather than the way of the sword, overcoming evil not with evil but with good. Since the power of all leaders comes from the cooperation of their people, we believe that nonviolent non-cooperation such as is illustrated in the lives of people like Martin Luther King and Mahatma Gandhi, who were both deeply influenced by Jesus, offers a costly but realistic alternative to the way of war. In our times such thinking is often labeled idealistic and naive, but it may be far less so than the thinking of those who believe that a world of justice, peace and freedom can be achieved through the creation of ever greater instruments of violence. The true realist may be Jesus who calls us to love our enemies, to continually work for reconciliation, to live as brothers and sisters within God's global family, to be more willing to suffer than to inflict suffering and, if need be, to even be more willing to die than to kill.

Responsible and Realistic

Having encouraged a sense of personal responsibility, even for the future life of the planet, it may be well to add that this does not mean encouragement to play at being God. Someone is reported to have said that "the best day in my life was when I resigned from being chairman of the board of the universe." It is well for each of us to begin and end the day with that kind of resignation. It is a relief to know that we are not responsible for everything and that we can ultimately entrust the care of the earth into the hands of God. We are, however, responsible under God to do all within our power to create a better world. Being unable to do everything is not an excuse for doing nothing. Someone has said that "we live in the eighth day of creation" and this means that we are co-creators with God working together for the improvement of this still imperfect world. That, we believe, is to be our constant calling until we are brought by God's love and power through the final healing of resurrection into fullness of life in God's presence.

Take Time to Smell the Roses

As we look back over this letter we must confess that some of it seems a bit gloomy and grim. That mood is honestly reflective about how we feel concerning the dangers and challenges of our present time and we sincerely hope and fervently pray that the world in which you are growing up is far better and less ominous than the one in which we are now living. But even if that is not true we encourage you, none the less, to take time to smell the roses and to be open to the full enjoyment of all of the love and beauty in God's good creation. Someone has protested against such advice by saying, "It is difficult to enjoy the concert when the hall is in flames or to bask in the beauty of a sunset when the ship on which we are riding is sinking." There are certainly times to turn from the music, to put out the fire and to ignore the sunset to save the ship. But if all of life is to be fighting fires and saving ships, it is also true that we need to follow the example of Jesus who had time to observe the flowers and to retreat from the needy crowds to find personal refreshment and renewal. Receiving and giving are the rhythm of life. If we do not take time to receive, we will soon have little to give. Therefore, open your life to receive every

blessing and to enjoy every beauty. Be a great receiver, for only in so doing can you also be a great giver. Welcome love and laughter into your life and then give yourself in love for the laughter and joy of others. In that receiving and giving you will discover the joy of being true to your creator, to yourself, to other people and to this world in which you have been privileged to experience the great adventure of living.

Remember to Number Your Days

The psalmist prays “Teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom” (Psalm 90:12). A sign over a cemetery gate reads, “What you are we were. What we are, you will be.” Such thoughts need not move us to morbidity but can enable us to treasure the gift of every day and hour. Savor the joy of

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every passing moment. Do not put off living until some future tomorrow when you will have accomplished this or that. Live today in trust of the sustaining, ever blessing love of God. Welcome the love of people who truly care for you. Brighten the lives of others with your caring and sharing. Give your best self a chance and through the best and worst of times be sustained in trust that in Christ the best is yet to be.

Someone once described Napoleon as living with “future in his mind.” Whatever our joys or sorrows, we, too, are called to live with future in our minds. In Jesus we are promised that nothing in life or in death “will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:38). God who gives life promises in Christ to triumph over the last enemy of death and to bring us into life greater than the life we know now. When this seems too good to be true remember that God “is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think” (Eph 3:20). Trust those promises. Venture with bold confidence into the unknown future, trusting that whatever happens God will be there when it happens with the fullness of love and power promised to you in Jesus. You will often tremble and frequently fail, but God promises “I will never fail you nor forsake you” (Hebrews 13:5). Live by that promise.

God bless you these days and always.

With love, Your Grandparents