

One of the things we are asked as kids is “what do you want to be when you grow up?” And ideally, we sort that out as the years go by. But the answer to the question takes time, because ultimately, for all of us, we are called to become saints; to be people of hope who change this world for the better. Doing that requires a trust in God, listening to His plan with humility doing it His way rather than our own, and then realizing that no matter what the plan is, through how we live our lives and the choices we make, we teach others who God is through our way of life.

Some years ago Douglas Burford, who went on later in life to become a Presbyterian Minister, got an unexpected letter while he was still a young man.

His father had died in Vietnam when Doug was just 5. The last thing he expected was to receive a letter from his dad 17 years later, but that is what happened one winter day when he was 22 years old.

It was the day he and his fiance announced their engagement. His mom was overjoyed at the news, as was his stepfather. Such an event is a milestone for the mother of an only son. As such, it occurred to her that he

had now “become a man.” That realization sparked in her the memory that years ago she had been given a solemn duty to discharge.

Doug remembered being in the kitchen alone one evening. His mom walked in and handed him a letter copied onto mimeograph paper, the likes of which he had not seen since kindergarten. The seven pages were still folded, evidence of an envelope since discarded.

“What’s this” Doug asked.

“It’s something I should have given you years ago,” his mom said. “It’s a letter from your father. He wrote it to you from Vietnam soon after he arrived there, just in case something were to happen to him. You were little at the time of course. He said that if he were to not return from the war, I was to give it to you when you became a man. I forgot about it, to tell you the truth, although I thought I never would. When you and Claudia announced your engagement, it jogged my memory. It was been years since I had read or even thought about that. In reading it again, I realize that I should have given it to you a long time ago. I’m sorry.”

Doug writes that it was hard to describe how jolting her words were. You'd think he would have been ecstatic. Instead, he was in shock. It was too overwhelming. The letter in his hand seemed like a mysterious package with the potential to explode, depending on what it said.

While these things were racing through his mind, his body was having a reaction of its own. His face paled. He went a bit numb. His hands turned cold and began to tremble slightly. He took the letter and went to his room. He was completely unable to say anything to his mother other than "thank you."

He was in shock, and who wouldn't be, for all he had known of his dad was from stories handed down. He was stunned but gradually unfolded the letter, and after a few attempts just looking at the handwriting he'd never seen before, he kept folding it back up. Part of him he said was afraid to read it, afraid with one quarter of his life behind him now, his life somehow wouldn't have pleased his dad, that he would not have his blessing. By this stage in his life, Doug had adjusted to not having to take into account his father's approval or disapproval; now all of a sudden he felt he might have to.

A the same time, he felt humbled that he was even getting the chance to know his father's thoughts, and so he forced himself to just calm down and read. The letter in part said the following:

Dear Doug:

Your old man is writing this letter tonight because he feels the urge to share some basic thoughts with his only son. You are a very little boy at this writing, but the years will pass rapidly and someday soon you will be a young man facing the realities of life.

I fully expect to be around in the years to come and hope to assist you on your path through life; however, one never knows what the future will bring.

Someday you will have to decide on a career. Many well meaning people will offer their sincere advice and you will undoubtedly be quite confused. The choice of your life's work is equally as important as choosing a life's mate. Before you can do either, you must decide what you are yourself, as a person. As the years go by, you will soon discover whether you are outward or timid, adventuresome or docile, ambitious or complacent. It is

no sin to be one or the other; but it is extremely important that you discover what you are - not what at some moment in life you may think you would like to be.

After you decide what you are, think about what you would like to be within the personality and innate intelligence you possess - and then, unless you lack all ambition, pick a goal several steps higher than what you think you can achieve and work like the devil to achieve it. Remember, son, the tallest and straightest trees grow in crowded forests, where they must each individually reach for the very sun that enables them to grow into large and proud trees - in competition with the other trees. Scrub oaks only grow by themselves where they have no competition to spur them on.

Many people...exist in a dream world. I have heard ministers and teachers condemn the war in Vietnam on many grounds they sincerely believe to be unquestioningly valid. Their words of complaint have scant meaning when I watch people going to the Catholic church nearby on Sunday and realize until a few weeks ago, this was impossible because of Communist terrorism and military operations. I watch students, little boys like yourself, walk to school each morning under the protection of armed troops. I know

that no schools or churches are allowed to operate in parts of this district I advise because they are under Communist control.

It was said that centuries ago that for every man willing to lead, one thousand wait to be led. Your father is very proud of this army green he wears and would not trade his life as an Infantry Officer for any other endeavor, whatsoever. I hope someday you can say the same thing about what you have done for the first dozen years after achieving manhood.

Doug, you are a very intelligent boy and you have an extremely kind disposition. Should something happen to me, and I hope to still be serving in the world's action spots when you are my present age, do not try to emulate a way of life that may not be suitable to your own particular makeup. I do hope you will choose a way of life that holds some potential for helping to make this a better world...

Regardless of what career you choose, I do challenge you to do your part in defending the rights you have inherited. Do not rationalize and try to say you are doing your part if your conscience tells you otherwise. One must develop self-respect before he can hope to attain it from others.

Ten years from now, lets you and I sit down and discuss this far too wordy letter...and learn from each other, as I am sure that by then there will be much your old dad can learn from you.

Love,

Dad

When Doug finished reading that letter, he writes it was as if the weight of the world had been lifted from his shoulders. He was not faced with trying to rebuild his life after all. Instead, his dad had affirmed him, citing traits he had seen in him even when he was a little boy. His words were encouraging and motivating, not scolding or dogmatic. He did not lecture or warn him, but simply shared his thoughts. Instead of trying to persuade him to follow in his footsteps (which he had begun to do, even applying to West Point only to later withdraw his application), he held up virtues for which he could strive, no matter what career he chose. Doug writes that it felt good that after all those years, he had some basis for thinking his dad would have been proud of him.

His letter had filled a place in his heart that he had only been partly aware of and had no idea was so large. Doug had received his father's blessing. It had come after many years, even from beyond the grave, but it had finally come. Until then, even though he had a wonderful stepfather, Doug says he had not fully appreciated the power of a father over his children. This man was. virtual stranger to him, even though he shared his genes. Yet, because he was his father, his attention and affirmation in a letter mailed a week before his death profoundly impacted the course of his life as an adult. he says he gave him permission to proceed in a direction he would have gone anyway, but now could go with greater confidence.

He also sees God as of course having a huge hand in this, noting how he believes God works with our parents to help us sort so many things out as we strive to find our way in life and happiness.

As Doug's dad reminded him, we each have a purpose in life and can make such a difference. But for that to occur, it requires a listening, a trust with humility, and determination to love in return for the love we are given.



As we hear in the Psalm today, “In you Lord, I have found my peace.” The search for peace can be hard; but the starting point is to remember that God is with us always. Much like Doug’s dad wrote him that letter and is a sense journeying with him, so too does our God. He is there to encourage, to forgive, to lift us up.

But God is also there for us to listen to. It was hard for Doug to open that letter as he had such fears, but in reading his story, you get the sense that he listened to every word his dad gave him in advice and took it to heart, thinking about it deeply. God loves us so much, but sometimes like the Israelites in our first reading, we stray. This is why it’s so important to be attentive to the ways that God is speaking to us. Sometimes it is through silent meditation or just being with God in the church or for a walk in nature or for however you pray. It is also through the Church, which the Holy Spirit guides, who is there to give us guidance in faith and morals; as one of the first bishops, Saint Paul is doing this with his communities. He’s not trying to impose upon the people, but trying to liberate them. Just as sometimes when we are kids we do not understand the wisdom of our parents, so can we be when we look at certain aspects of Church teaching. But again, it’s so important to remember the Church is here to help us get to heaven so

hopefully we listen to her. And also, God sends us people, prophets if you will; for Doug it was that letter from his father, and probably many others in his life. Sometimes in our lives something goes off kilter or we make a bad choice or maybe are doing something like being overextended, or falling into a bad habit, whatever it might be. In these moments, what I've found is that people can do so much; sometimes they bring something to your attention, or other times you just have to be a little vulnerable and ask for advice and counsel and help.

And lastly, we must think about how we teach; as Doug's dad put it no matter where he goes, think about defending the rights you inherited. Looking at it through the Christian lens, the question is how do we teach the love we have inherited from God? The Pharisees in the Gospel have authority to teach; much like a parent does, or a teacher at school, or a coach. But Jesus calls them out because all they do is not for God, but for themselves; they wear longer tassels and phylacteries so people will see them and sense they are "holy" and they use God's law as something to lord over people while not always practicing what they preach. It's in this context that when Jesus says call no one Rabbi or Father, we of course can use titles, but the point is that the authority we observe exercised in

human relationships is ultimately founded and modeled on the dominion, fatherhood and teaching authority of God. This is why how we exercise authority must be for God's glory; to help people in life find true happiness; and to serve one another, for as Jesus says the greatest among you must be your servant...anyone who humbles himself will be exalted." Doug's dad lived that out; he just wanted his son to be happy in life, but he was also doing so much in a dangerous area to try to help people. Sometimes we need to get introspective and say to ourselves what do our actions (or inactions) indicate to the world about who God is? How do we teach the faith to our kids and family and friends? How do we help others see God through how we live our lives? Sometimes we can get caught up in ego, or being noticed; or a parent can live their dreams through their kids; or we can do things just to get something in return. Jesus shows us the better way - teaching others how to obtain true happiness in their lives through speaking about the faith and living it out.

One of the many blessings I've been given in life is a great relationship with my parents. And while there may have been a time or two when I was a little kid wondering about this or that rule or boundary, as the years have gone by, I've seen in them time and time again how they have taught and

shown me so much about true happiness in life, not the fleeting kind, but the deeper kind, because all that they have done is for the glory of God, in trying to help me understand who He is and how to make this world a little bit of a better place than it was when they came into it. God has such great plans for you and me, which is why we are here. May we listen to Him, and never forget what a difference we can make when we let go, let God, and follow our dreams to true happiness while helping others to do the same.