

## Six Life Lessons from your Dad

### *How to choose your Friends and be a Good Friend yourself*

A father reflects upon his first 50 years in a letter to his college age children. He suggests that they can have a fulfilling and fun life, in an uncertain world, by wisely choosing their friends. The letter started as private, family email. But the kids realized its potential for helping people - throughout life - and challenged their father to publish it. The letter can act as a mirror, helping readers to recall their own unique life lessons, and once in a while, undertake courageous changes – such cultivating peace among their own loved ones.

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by Rod Zimmerman ( Gmail: [intro2rodz](mailto:intro2rodz), Twitter: RodZb)

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[KTRS-AM St. Louis, Rod with Host Victoria Babu](#)



[Reprint: December 2, 2008](#)



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[Parents Newsletter Article: April 30, 2009](#)

August 24, 2008

**Dear Danielle and Jonathan,**

Good luck tomorrow on your first day of school, Danielle's senior year and Jonathan's freshman year at the University of Missouri. *I love you both* and am bursting with pride about your accomplishments and potential to make a contribution in the world. I am also pleased that you live in the same city, Columbia, and hope that you can continue to be a source of strength for each other.

As I close my eyes, the years melt away, and I can see myself at your ages, 21 and 18, on my college campus: [walking](#) to class, browsing in the book store, engaged with friends, playing sports, studying late at night, and just being inspired by the motivated and talented people surrounding me. You are so fortunate now.

But the time between being a college student and being the parent of college students passes quickly. To help you use your time well, I have compiled some life lessons. They draw upon my experience with many great friends, teachers, bosses, co-workers, mentors, and competitors – attempting to share with you common factors in our successes and failures.

*Everyone deserves respect and compassion as a human being.* But my hope is that these life lessons may serve as a catalyst, to help you sort out in your own way, how much you can trust new people with whom you may become close or intimate. As your grandfather drove me to college in 1976, he tried to do something similar by quoting Shakespeare [\[1\]](#). But his advice was over my head. So I will try to be more practical with you two. In a few years, perhaps you can do even better?

Love, Dad

\* \* \*

**Some new opportunity stands before you. What do you do? *Begin with your heart.* It is a reliable guide. *But so is your brain.* Be courageous in using them in tandem. Probe deeply, past appearance and even intelligence, to core character that people develop through the triumphs and tragedies of their experience. Ask these six hard questions of potential lovers, friends, and colleagues – *patiently* – sometimes allowing months for the true answers to emerge:**

**1) Do you have a good relationship with your parents, or if this is not possible, have you made peace with your parents?**

We are born into this world dependent on parents and immediate family for everything that we need to survive. What kids learn from this experience depends on how well their parents lived up to this trust. Did the parents act maturely, in the [best interests](#) of their kids? Watch out for people who were neglected or abused, even verbally, by their parents. Unless they are making [peace](#) with it as adults, their unresolved anger at *being hurt by a protector* could turn into rage [\[2\]](#) and [explode](#) on you.

Remember the ethics that you learned in the [Ten Commandments](#), "Honor your Father and Mother ...". It does not say love your parents. *Love between people is voluntary.* No parents are perfect and some are abusive. So it is a good sign when someone [rises above](#) all of our imperfections and finds a way to at least honor their parents. Yet if you observe a person dishonoring someone else, especially one of their own parents, be *realistic*. Ask why you would have confidence that they might consistently honor or love you.

People who view one or both of their parents as *heroes* may be prepared to transfer [\[3\]](#) [\[4\]](#) that trust to a deserving third person - perhaps you - especially if you remind them of the parent that they view as a hero.

**2) Are you comfortable in your own skin?**

When you look in the mirror do you like the person who stares back? Any body type can have *inner beauty*. Watch out for people who strongly dislike part of their [own body](#).

People can't be more honest with you than they are with themselves. When someone says they are working hard, are they being completely honest or are they fooling themselves? The same with diet and exercise.

Associate with people who bravely deal with bad news. The famous boxer Joe Louis once said, "He can run, but he can't hide." People who are honest with themselves insist [5] on hearing bad news and responding to it immediately.

### 3) Do you consistently help and avoid hurting people, including yourself and others?

Associate with people who make helping others a priority in their lives. Look deeper than their choice of professions and ask whether they truly enjoy helping others. Consistently helping includes *making the ordinary fun*, being generous, and settling disputes. Avoid hurting yourself includes substance abuse - alcohol, drugs, *and unhealthy food*.

My Hindu friends say, "Help ever, hurt never." Ever and never are high standards, with many cases that appear to have both help and hurt. Examples: hurt a little now, but help much in the long-run; or hurt yourself a bit to greatly help someone else. Gravitate towards people who find the middle ground. Watch out for people who are unrealistic, doormats, or selfish.

### 4) Who are your mentors and mentees?

Successful people commonly volunteer to help others become successful. The good feeling that comes from mentoring can be more powerful than money. Especially in your early career, the mentoring of a good boss, as well as colleagues, may be *more valuable than your paycheck*.

So it is a good sign when someone has attracted mentors *and freely gives them credit*. It is also a good sign when someone who is already successful takes the time to raise others up. Watch out for people who claim to be successful and say they did it all on their own. Some people are partially ready for this question and can tell you about their mentors, but not their mentees. *They don't get it*.

### 5) Who are your friends and colleagues?

What do you notice looking at the group of people surrounding potential new friends and colleagues? Here are some good signs: Long-standing friendships, positive common interests that bind the group, having fun without hurting anyone, and a consigliere - a trusted friend who privately presents alternatives to promote wise decisions.

Watch out for people who rely upon control, rather than up-front, principled, mutual interest. A loyal friend will keep the pressures of your respective roles in mind (buyer, seller, advisor, partner, parent, friend, employee, etc.) and suggest *win-win* compromises, when your interests diverge.

*Listen* circumspectly to what people communicate, spoken and *unspoken*, as if you had a *third ear* [6] connected to your heart.



The Mirror of Truth [7]

**Loyal Friends** *find a moment* when your heart & mind are open to convey hard truths - to help you.

**Flatterers** *can't wait to* tell you what you want to hear - to help themselves a little.

**Frauds** *stage a moment* to knock you off-balance - to leverage your resources for their great benefit.

Look at how people manage expectations. Do they know what they want and is it just [8]? Do they say anything to get their way? Or do they under promise and over deliver? Do they set reasonable boundaries or are their boundaries fluid?

When you work on teams, be on guard for these signs of conflicts of interest popping up: ambiguous responsibilities, withholding of best efforts, partial disclosures, differing time horizons, and over scheduling.

Nurture your friendships, but listen to your inner voice. Once in a while, if you schedule an event that later seems forced, *postpone it with confidence*. People who you would want as friends will understand. A similar event may be just around the corner - and *even more fun*.

## 6) Do you consistently follow your guidelines?

Watch how people respond *after* hard-won success or bitter failure. Some people's worst mistakes occur soon after hard-won success. Others are quitters, who take themselves out of the game after failures. Yet others are motivated by failure to heroics.

*Balance* being positive and realistic. Limit your time in the company of non-optimistic people. When possible, avoid *working for* non-optimistic people. While you may rationalize the money that you earn, you may be exposing your soul to their emotional kryptonite and risk losing what makes you *super*.

In business, venture capitalists invest to *accelerate success*, but usually not to make the difference between success and failure. Similarly, be open to the possibility of growth in people, but be humble about your ability to change them. Anybody can *say* that they have changed. Believe it only after you understand the struggle that caused change and after you see deeds that demonstrate it.

No one succeeds all the time. 100% is an "A" in school. But in the real world of risk & reward, 80% to 90% is an "A." But if you are under-challenged and miss a chance to learn from mistakes, *100% might be a "B."*

The keys to success are to *value everyone's time*, prioritize according to your passions & values, manage your health, learn from mistakes, delegate unambiguously, adapt continuously, forgive quickly (yourself & others), apologize bravely, fight *persistently*, and have some fun every day. Success in major goals, like earning a college degree, running a business, battling a severe illness, or nurturing love at times requires the visible commitment of your total strength & restraint from pursuing conflicting goals. *Help people believe in you.*

\* \* \*

Thanks for *listening* and tolerating your old man. At least a few times in your life, you will fall into trouble. In fact, I hesitated to write this letter, out of concern that you might be reluctant to seek my help, if you did not follow my advice. Don't worry. I am still working towards these ideals myself. Count on my best efforts to help you, just as many people help me. *I am your friend, as well as your father.*

Be careful in applying these life lessons *not to dismiss people*. An early mentor told me that he silently asks these questions as he meets new people: Would I trust this person with managing a \$1,000 project? a \$10,000 project? a \$100,000 project? Be open to *many role players* in your life, but remember your few, true, lifelong friends.

*Do not be intimidated* by other people's expectations. Life is more fun when you stretch arbitrary or self-serving rules that do not truly protect people. *Your imagination opens many paths* for having fun. Try things that are different, risky, or even seem impossible. But ultimately, be honest with yourself and *choose paths that help, and do not hurt people.*

***Everyone deserves respect and compassion as a human being. But raise the bar for the biggest projects in your career and the most important relationships of your life. Don't worry that you will be lonely in your selectivity. Follow these Life Lessons yourself, while being active in the world, and like-minded people will find you.***

If any of the lessons don't make sense, it could be that I am wrong. Or read them again in a few years ;-)

### **Author's Bio**

Rod Zimmerman is the president of Dynalivery Corporation, a software development firm specializing in reporting and printing software, with customers in 11 countries. He graduated from the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor with a Bachelors degree in Computer and Communications Sciences in 1981. He is the father of two college age children. He writes as a hobby and as an occasional free-lance project. He is an avid news reader and has recently taken up Nintendo Wii Bowling with a high game of 258 out of 300 pins. He is a big believer in internships, having worked himself as a college summer intern many years ago in government, university research, and private industry. He has served as a mentor to more than 20 summer interns. This article summarizes much of what he has learned from his many, generous mentors and friends.

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### **Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs):**

#### **FAQ-1. How can parents best be friends of their children?**

"I am your friend, as well as your father" is an underlying theme of the entire letter. It does not mean that parents should be peers or buddies of their children. It is more leadership by [example](#). It means keeping the best interests of late adolescent or adult children in mind, restraint by progressively speaking in terms of suggestions instead of orders as children get older, being open to children sometimes mentoring parents, making fair compromises when you can't please everyone, avoid pitting family members against each other, and especially *offering help without controlling, puppet strings*. The key is for parents to act as loyal friends in good times, so that later, when a child may really need a parent's help (or vice versa), they can ask for it comfortably, promptly, and without drama. In fact, this idea may apply more broadly than to just parents and children. Years ago when I asked a peer friend for help, his first words were, "I am glad that you were comfortable asking me."

#### **FAQ-2. Is early qualification of new people in your life practical?**

Do we need to be involved with someone for a long time before we can answer these questions? If so, does it make it impractical or arrogant to ask them early in a new relationship? This is a common response to this article, often based on one or more of the following underlying objections:

- 1) Recognizing that life is short, you have limited control, and you never know when your circumstances and those of the people you love may change so take (reasonable) pleasure when you can.
- 2) Fear of being alone due to having few, truly special opportunities - romantic, social, or business.
- 3) Respecting a supernatural influence guiding us to new people.
- 4) Fundamental belief in being open - to new people, ideas, and ways of experiencing life.
- 5) Greater power in cultivating a larger personal network, to reach more people and what they know, including the contacts of your contacts. (See social networking web sites like Facebook where people may list huge numbers of friends.)
- 6) Discomfort in the possible implication that had we (or our parents) been more selective, our children (or we ourselves) would not have been born, or entered into some special relationship.

I take these points seriously and suggest that if we are to apply these Life Lessons effectively, we should apply them humbly, as follows: *Proceed slowly in new relationships, allow the truth to naturally emerge, as is the custom in some cultures*. Recognize that we will never know someone else completely. But if we pay attention to small signs, we can learn enough to make good, early choices. Be brave in asking these questions and be a patient and keen listener as you sort out their answers. And remember that none of us are perfect. A good match may be someone whose foibles are merely complementary to our own.

### **FAQ-3. Is there a conflict between cautious intimacy with victims of abuse (life lesson #1) and helping others (life lesson #3)?**

Some readers told me that they had been abused as young children but through therapy [9] and friendship, they made progress in overcoming it. But had they been shunned, they may have not recovered. At the same time, they wanted their own children to be highly selective in who they chose as friends! Some readers suggested that my words about victims of abuse such as "Watch out ..." were too strong or did not account for the possibility of successful therapy. Others suggested that I keep the wording I had or make it even stronger. I put much thought into striking a **reasonable balance**. Please refer to these points in the letter (emphasis added):

*Everyone* deserves respect and compassion as a human being. [Introduction & Conclusion]

*Unless they are making peace with it as adults*, their unresolved anger at being hurt by a protector could turn into rage ... [Life Lessons #1]

Be *open* to the possibility of growth. [Life Lessons #6]

Be careful in applying these life lessons *not to dismiss people*. [Conclusion]

The life lessons are consistent with each other, as long **we temper caution with compassion**.

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<http://parentrelations.missouri.edu/stay-informed/newsletter>

<http://www.facebook.com/pages/My-Knowledge/73498484961>

Rod Zimmerman Apr 28, 2009

## **Fantastic insight!!**

From Jan 30, 2009:

This article was fantastic! As a mental health professional, I see one prevailing theme with parents: they do not always follow the path of friendship and parenting. Mr. Zimmerman eloquently conveys this message in a way that all parents should explore in their relationship with their young adult children. Kudos to Mr. Zimmerman for a wonderful article! I will most definitely recommend this to parents of young adults!

From May 2, 2009:

I continue to be amazed at the wonderful additions to your article! As a Licensed Professional Counselor, I want to comment on the idea of being cautious with intimacy with regard to victims of abuse. I have had the pleasure of seeing and working with many people who have identified themselves as "victims of abuse" and have transformed their world view and identity to Survivors and ultimately "Thrivors". This important growth and healing enables many individuals to develop and maintain deep, powerful interpersonal relationships. I understand using caution, but please keep in mind that healing from abuse is a powerful recovery and can work! All the best to you and please keep writing!

Dawn Bergman MA, LPC

## **Life lessons of a Father**

As a proud parent, I believe wholly in this article, and will pass it on to my family and friends. Thanks for sharing this advice with the world, and God Bless.

Aaron Bernat Oct 31, 2008

## **Great Article and Guidance**

Imagine what a much greater society we would be in today, if only the majority of this world could follow these rules. These are lessons that everyone should follow and pass along. As you go through life, meet new acquaintances, and seek advice, ask yourself these 6 rules about the person whom you just met. If they don't pass the rules, then weed them out of your life. A yard looks much better when there are no weeds sticking up!

Joyce Pierce Oct 27, 2008

## **Untitled**

I wish you and your children the best. Your letter will be printed and posted in a place that I can go to when I need to heal. Truly wonderful advice.

Adam Eng Nov 15, 2008

## **Great article & wonderful sentiment**

I really enjoyed reading these life truths - they are universal, I believe, and valuable to expose to the younger generation.

Dawn Cassara Sept 9, 2008

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