



<http://www.forbetterlife.org/>

Values for a Better Life

Ambition	Including Others
Appreciation	Integrity
Believing in Others	Learning
Caring	Listening
Character	Live Your Dreams
Class and Grace	Love
Commitment	Loyalty
Common Ground	Opportunity
Compassion	Optimism
Cooperation	Patience
Courage	Perseverance
Courtesy	Persistence
Dedication	Respect
Dependability	Responsibility
Determination	Right Choices
Diversity	Sacrifice
Do The Right Thing	Self-Esteem
Effort	Service
Forgiveness	Sharing
Friendship	Soul
Gratitude	Strength
Hard Work	Teaching by Example
Helping Others	Tolerance
Honesty	Trust
Hope	Unity
Humility	Vision

Ambition

When I was three years old my father passed away, leaving my mother alone to teach four boys how to grow and live and love. It wasn't easy for her at all; she worked twelve hour shifts as a teacher who taught night school. But somehow she managed to pull it off. She would come home late, fix us dinner, listen to our stories, and put us all to bed before she had any time to herself. We never thought much of it at the time, but it's obvious now that we were her life. I remember asking her about it, why she made so many sacrifices for us, and her answer was amazing. "Your success will be my greatest achievement." From that day on my attitude and actions changed. I had the strength and the courage to deal with problems instead of turning away. I wanted to push myself to new heights and racing towards this challenge was the answer. She came to every competition and was always the first person at the finish line and the last person to leave. I can still hear those words that changed my life. Her goal was to give us a leg up and the opportunity to do great things, my ambition is to take that opportunity and run with it.

Appreciation

I've been teaching now for over fifteen years and still haven't found a way to prepare for the last day of the school year. The first day of school always begins with anxiety and nervousness as each student, and myself, find their place in our little world of the classroom. We share that world together for the next nine months. I laugh, cry and eventually celebrate the success as students progress. But the same emotions of joy and sadness flow as I say good-bye on the last day of school. It's like saying farewell to family that I may never see again. I always manage to keep a smile until the last student leaves. Then I sit and let the tears flow as I look over the gifts left on my desk by departing students. After all those days of wondering if I have made a difference, I look at the cards. "You are the best teacher ever. I love you," I read as I quietly reach for the almost empty box of tissue.

Believing in Others

As our van pulled up to the ranch to start a three-month program for troubled boys, we passed a cowboy on his horse. Bill was the owner of the ranch, and he sat at the gate to wave us in. We made eye contact through the dusty window and he winked at me and touched the brim of his cowboy hat in welcome. All summer long Bill and his ranch-hands taught us to ride horses, bale hay, chop wood, and roundup cattle. He understood the value of working with your hands, and we respected him for his knowledge and gentle leadership. He knew how important it was for boys like me to know that someone believed in them. He trusted us to do the job and do it right, and we didn't want to let him down. Several times that summer he took me fishing and we not only talked about how to cast a line and bait a hook, but also about my dreams and what I wanted from life. He encouraged me to make goals and shared stories from his own experiences. The last day at the ranch, Bill pulled me aside and commended me for the work I had done that summer - not only on the ranch, but also on myself. He told me if I ever needed anything I could count on him. Four years later, I took him up on that offer. I called him up and asked for a job. I told him how his confidence in me had given me the courage to change my life. I explained that I wanted to help others in the same way. He offered me a job on the spot. I'm proud to say that each summer I'm the one who opens the gate for a van full of young men who need someone to believe in them, so they can learn to believe in themselves.

Caring

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Character

By the number of cars outside of my Aunt's house, I knew she was up to something. Whether it was a clothing drive for the homeless, or a book drive for the new library, my Aunt was always at the front organizing the whole thing. She is amazing. I have never seen her sit back and wait for things to get better. If it needs doing, she is the one to pull everyone together and get the project under way. As I enter her house, I am greeted by laughter and chatter pouring from the kitchen. Once again she is taking the lead and some needy families in the area are going to have a wonderful dinner tonight.

Class and Grace

It was my sister Katie's wedding day. She floated through the reception hall smiling and thanking guests, dancing with each of the grandpas, and taking time to chat with the flower girls. She looked so beautiful and serene that no one would have guessed that the florist had used the wrong flowers, the three-tiered cake had arrived lopsided, and a bridesmaid had torn her skirt minutes before the ceremony. Incidents that could have turned the day into a tense and disappointing event were cause for laughter because of Katie's outlook. Behind the scenes, I watched as she reacted calmly and sympathetically to the apologetic florist, then laughed and posed for candid pictures with the uneven cake. When the bridesmaid tripped in her heels and tore the hem of her skirt, Katie didn't panic, but assisted her in stapling the tear together, which resulted in more candid photos of the two of them posing with the stapler. While friends discuss their confrontations with stressed brides, I remain silent. I have a picture hanging on my wall of my smiling sister posing with a lopsided cake that reminds me of the lasting impression of class and grace in all circumstances.

Commitment

Here we stand arm-in-arm in our oldest child's backyard on a beautiful summer evening, surrounded by friends and family. Candles are twinkling, tables are piled high with food, and big band music is playing out of speakers on the patio. It is our 40th wedding anniversary party. As our daughter toasts our love and our commitment to each other and everyone raises their glasses above their heads, I catch the sight of a tear glimmering in the corner of my wife's eye. We didn't make it this far because it was easy. We made it through 40 years of marriage because we vowed that we would; we were committed even when it didn't feel like we were, and that meant never backing out, even when it was hard, or uncomfortable, or painful. We learned to compromise, and discovered that difficult situations can make you stronger and more patient. Staying committed to your goals and dreams doesn't guarantee you'll have an easy road, but you'll be working toward

something important with every step you take in that direction. Tonight, the smile on my wife's face is all I need to tell me it has been worth it.

Common Ground

A few months ago I spontaneously picked up a flyer at the supermarket requesting volunteers at the local homeless shelter and called to offer my services. Pulling into the parking lot of the shelter, I noticed a man standing outside smoking a cigarette. I remembered seeing him a few weeks before at the mall. He had been sitting outside the parking garage with a sign offering work for food. I thought to myself, if he wants to work, why not get a job like everyone else? I was annoyed at the twinge of guilt I felt for not handing him the spare change in my cup holder, but I quickly forgot him as I returned home to start dinner. Now here he was again, and I smiled awkwardly as I walked past. I realized that I was about to serve dinner to a man who I wouldn't have made eye contact with a week ago. After the meal, I was sent to sort clothing with some of the shelter's temporary residents. Sure enough, the man was there, placing shirts in one pile, pants in another. As we worked, we started talking. I learned he had a little girl close to my daughter's age whom he missed very much. I was surprised to discover that we had grown up in the same city. We reminisced about a restaurant in that area that had been well known for its fried chicken. As the evening ended, I realized I was sorry to finish our conversation. Over a pile of used clothing I had learned an unexpected lesson: if we take the time, we might find that we have more in common with those around us than we ever imagined.

Compassion

"Do you want to talk?" he asked when he sat next to me. I think he already knew the answer to the question and wasn't surprised when I chose to say nothing at all. For hours we sat together staring at the ocean as our thoughts shifted with the breeze. Every once in a while he would look over at me and smile in a way that let me know everything would be all right. Every once in a while I would look over at him and see nothing but sincerity. If you asked me now why I was sad and alone that day, I couldn't tell you. All I can remember is my father's hand on my shoulder, his gentle smile, and the calm reassurance that turned away my fears. No matter what happened I knew he would be there for me just as he was then. Two hours of his time gave me wisdom beyond my years and the memory of his compassion in everything he did for me is one of the few that will never ever fade.

Cooperation

I screamed with glee as the tug on my fishing rod nearly pulled me onto my face. With his strong arms, my father reached over and helped me reel in the big mass of sea weed. He and my sister began laughing as I stared in disbelief. "It's OK," he smiled, "we'll get another one." It didn't help that my mom nearly dropped the camera from laughing so hard. We never did get a fish, but through the years he helped me in many other ways. I would work in his dental office after school and help any way I could. At night, he would help me with my homework. And my sister led the family cheering section when I received my college diploma. We were a team. I realize now how much happier my life is when I am working with others. Whether they are helping me, or I am helping them, burdens seem a little lighter and time is a little sweeter. And some day I just might get that fish.

Courage

Very few people get the opportunity and privilege to have an impact. I like to think that each day I do my job in some small way I have changed something for the better. It doesn't need to be anything huge; when I was six it was as simple as getting my cat from the top of a tree. What equated to moments out of a normal day for this man became something extraordinary to me. Now that I've become what I admired, I've had to learn to deal with situations that are both unexpected and difficult. There have been times when I've seen something so powerful the tears begin to fall before the emotion even registers. It's during those times that I fall back on memories. The difficult experiences in my life make every other moment better than it would have been otherwise. Why do I do what I do? Because I need to find the moments that change the places and lives around me, and more importantly the moments that change me. It's what I live for. The desire to walk through each day with that ultimate goal in mind is the only fire that burns forever.

Courtesy

“What a great way to greet another person,” I thought to myself as two Japanese business men approached each other with a slight bow. I wasn't hearing some cliché greeting filled with insincere flattery, but witnessing a genuine act of courtesy. I had been attending these trade shows and conferences for years, yet I had never had a single act make such an impression on me. Watching these two gentlemen, I became lost in thought and stopped. Just a few minutes earlier, I had barely dodged a door slamming toward my face. The person in front of me had not even looked to see if anyone else was following him before letting the door go. *Wham!* I guess I had picked a bad place to stop in the busy corridor. A sudden bump from behind jolted me back to the present and I saw an armload of pamphlets go flying. I immediately bent down and started gathering up the scattered pamphlets. As I handed my collection to their courier he smiled, “I guess I owe you an apology and a thank you. You really didn't need to help pick those up.” “Yes, I did,” I told him. As I started back down the crowded corridor, my smile grew just a little bit wider.

Dedication

By looking solely at our season record, we would be called failures. In three years, we never did win a single game, yet none of us seemed to notice. And every summer my neighbor would volunteer to be our coach. That woman possessed more patience than anyone I have ever known. We were truly awful on the field. We were the shortest team with the slowest legs, but we had the greatest cheerleader on the sidelines who would never let us feel like we had lost. Teamwork, sportsmanship and respect were encouraged by her every action, and name calling was never tolerated. In her small way, she showed us that winning doesn't always take place on a scoreboard. As a matter of fact, if you had ever been to one of the post game parties at her house, you would have thought we were undefeated. We didn't just unknowingly learn to live better lives by being around her; we also learned that she could whip up a mean pan of brownies.

Dependability

A large jolt shook through the controls as the cockpit lights flickered rapidly. We had taken a hit from enemy forces. A second jolt followed as I fought to keep the heavy cargo plane from rolling to one side. This was my fifth supply mission in three days and my droopy, bloodshot eyes told the story. However, I knew that the refugees were depending on us for their very survival. I will

never forget their hopeless looks turning to weary smiles as they saw fresh water and food for the first time in weeks. We continued through the darkness as the sound of enemy fire drifted away behind us. Soon a line of lights appeared in the distance and we began our descent toward a makeshift landing strip. I would never recommend that landing for a flight school training film, but all three landing gear eventually settled down and the plane rolled to a halt. As I walked around the plane, my gaze moved from the gaping hole in the rear stabilizer toward the small group of smiling people huddled in the darkness along the edge of the runway.

Determination

I am a teacher in a school for blind and visually impaired children. When someone inquires about my job, I get the same reaction almost every time. They express concern and pity for my students and comment on how difficult it must be to work with children who have such a life-altering disability. Instead of telling them not to feel sorry for my students, I invite them to drop by for an afternoon. Few take me up on the offer, but when they do, they leave changed. I love to watch their astonished expressions when they see us practicing for track events and basketball, or for the school play we put on each spring. They are amazed that we surf the net, read the classics, and participate in statewide science fairs. My students are a group of the most determined and bright children I know. They solve complex problems with remarkable insight and creativity. They have to work not only against their inability to see, but also against the stereotypes in the minds of those around them. And when my kids set their mind to something, stand out of their way. Their resolve to succeed in an often-unfriendly world makes what might have been a difficult life, a truly extraordinary one.

Diversity

As I watch my daughter opening her birthday gifts, while seated in a circle on the floor with all of her friends; I can't help but think of how strange this little group would have seemed just a few years ago, or even today, in different parts of the world. The diversity of the children is astounding to me — the ethnic and religious backgrounds represented by this small circle span at least eight or nine countries. I am delighted by their innocence and ease with each other. As she blows out her candles, and the other children wait breathlessly to see if she will get her wish, I know that this is where acceptance begins. This environment is where the tapestry of belief gets woven; these little ones don't see differences, they see similarities. And when differences do arise, I'm hoping that they will be a cause for celebration and growth. Today this little circle of friendship helps me believe we are making a good start.

Do The Right Thing

Thursday night. That's our night and Dad never let me down. Sure we had to make exceptions for special events now and then, but he never canceled or forgot. I've since grown up and have a family of my own, but I still call Dad every Thursday night, if he doesn't call me first. I realize now how difficult it was for him to give me that night every week. I'm sure there was always work to do and I know there were nights that he just wanted to relax. One Thursday his best friend called with tickets to the big game. I'm sure his friend thought he was crazy when he turned down the ticket saying, "Sorry, but I have some important plans for tonight." I felt ten feet tall hearing my Dad say I was more important than the game. The only problem I have calling Dad every Thursday is my own son's complaint that it takes time from our night. Some day he'll understand and I'm sure he'll forgive me for those 15 minutes I spend on the phone. After all, it's our night.

Effort

“Did you give it your best?” he asked as I dragged my feet toward the car. Our college baseball team had just been beaten four to one. I looked up to see a man in a baseball cap with a clipboard. “I guess so,” was my reply. “Good. Then you have no reason to hang your head.” “But we lost,” was all I could say. “Yeah, that has a way of happening,” he said. “Do you think the other team did their best?” “They played better than us,” I replied. “Of course they did. That’s why they won. But then, you guys won the previous three games. And you are batting .355. I wouldn’t call it a bad season at all, would you?” What was this guy getting at anyway? I always tried my best. My dad had taught me that. He never left anything half done, nor did he ever back out of a commitment or promise. His motto was to give it your all, even if the situation looked hopeless. The man with the clipboard handed me a business card. It was then that I noticed the World Series ring on his finger. “If you’re serious about always giving it your best effort, give me a call at the end of the season. I’d like to bring you into the majors.”

Forgiveness

As young boys we used to enjoy skipping class to take the short hike down to the river and see who could catch the biggest trout. This year had been a great year for fishing. The conditions were perfect, and so was my fishing rod. I vividly remember opening that present with my friend, Tom, at my side the morning of my birthday. We were both so excited. On this particular day it was his turn to carry it to the river. We shared as he was still working on saving enough money to buy one of his own just like mine. As we headed down the embankment, he slid and fell bracing his fall with his hand, and my fishing pole. We both heard it snap and I saw the look in his eyes when they met mine. Well, I said some things that I definitely shouldn’t have. I insulted things that he told me in confidence. I violated his trust. I made him leave. I distinctly remember walking home alone that day holding a piece of my prize possession in each hand, feeling more awful about what had happened to me than what I had just made happen. As I got closer to the house, I could tell something was wrong. When I got inside, my family was sitting perfectly still in a circle. “The weather is getting bad, son. We only have about a week left to harvest our crops before they say the storms will start.” I was shocked. Only a week before we could lose it all. I was about to say something to my father when I heard a knock. As I opened the door there stood Tom, my best friend, his hands in his pockets as he stared at his shoes. “I just heard about the storms, Rick. I thought maybe you could use some help.” I was amazed. My father smiled as he stood up and said, “Let’s get started.” Tom’s forgiveness went a long way in helping my family through that difficult time. Together, as friends, we have both come a long way since then. And it’s far from over...

Friendship

I have a picture that sits on my desk at work. When the day gets long, or my clients get impatient, I remember to take a moment and look at the photo. It is a picture of my best friends taken years ago. It reminds me of the good times we have shared and the support that their friendship still gives me today. Even though our lives have gone in different directions, the bond we created has kept us close. Rare is the week that I don’t get a message on my answering machine from one of them “just checking in” or a letter in the mail with the latest baby or vacation photos. Frequently I get e-mail messages with a joke for the day or words of comfort for something going on in my life. My friends have shown up for surprise birthday parties, sent flowers for no reason, and one of them even drove five hours just to watch my daughter’s first piano recital. Our friendship has carried me through a lot of difficult experiences, and has enriched the good ones. It is the kind of

friendship that outlasts disagreements, changes, and separation. Which reminds me, I have a few e-mails to answer.

Gratitude

“Thanks for stopping by,” he said with a big, gap-toothed smile. I smiled back and continued on my way. How could that old flower-cart owner be so cheerful? All I ever did was stop and look at his flowers during my rush to work. I had been passing his cart for over a year now and still hadn’t bought a single flower. Yet, everyday I got that same cheerful smile and simple thank you. The next day I decided I’d finally buy a bunch of carnations for my desk and see how the man treated me after a purchase. “Thanks for stopping by,” was his sole response, along with that big gap-toothed smile. I couldn’t resist any longer and asked him, “Why do you thank me for stopping every day when I never make a purchase?” He looked at me for a moment and said, “Everybody that stops and admires my flowers makes me glad of what I do. I try to bring some cheer into this busy world and when someone stops to look, I feel I’ve done a good job.” “Thanks for being here,” was my smiling response as I hurried on to work.

Hard Work

He never complained, at least not when we kids were around, but I could tell his job was rough. Every morning he grabbed his lunch bag and kissed my mom. Then I would stand at the window waving as he backed out of the driveway in that old, beat-up truck. He would always give me a smile, wave back and blow a kiss before turning down the road to work. Late in the evening, I would hear the truck rattle up the drive and look out to see a weary man drag his way up the walkway to the door. As he entered the house, a bright smile would flash across his face and he would gather us up for a big hug. It was during these hugs that I first noticed the stained, rough hands and the wrinkled signs of hard work. Every day our ritual continued. Every day we had food on the table and a warm home to live in. Every day he showed me the results of hard work and the joy of a loving home. Now I am older and my father has passed on. Whenever I feel like complaining about my job, or how tough things are; I just get back to work, smile, and realize how much I learned from him.

Helping Others

It was a wonderful house. My wife and I were so excited when we found it. After five years of living in a small apartment, and with a baby on the way; it was time to finally have a home with a real yard. The morning was spent loading the rental truck and doing the final clean-up at the apartment. I would have rather called it a day at that point, but I knew we had only a few hours to unload at our new home and return the truck to avoid another day’s rental fee. I backed up our driveway and took the first few boxes into the house. I wasn’t sure how I was going to get everything off that truck before 5:00 p.m. As I trudged out the door for the next load of boxes, I was nearly knocked over by a fast moving chair. Attached to that chair was an apologetic teenager. “Sorry,” she said, “didn’t mean to hit you. I saw your pregnant wife out front and thought you guys could use some help.” Just then I noticed a line of boxes coming into the house, all being carried by smiling neighbors. My wife began scurrying around directing traffic. I barely got to handle four more loads, and in less than half an hour the truck was empty. We had definitely found our dream home.

Honesty

I knew something was wrong because he always seemed happier than this after spending time with his friends; so I asked him about it. They had just finished playing a game of basketball and were getting on their bikes to head home. As he was unlocking his, it tipped over, scratching and denting a nearby car. The sullen look on his face indicated he had come home without telling this to anyone. I asked him if he wanted to run errands with me. As we were driving to the store together, I explained the choice that he would have to make and the consequences of his decision. On the way home, I asked him if he wanted to stop at the park and he sheepishly answered, "No." "Well then, do you want some lunch?" I asked as we pulled over. The restaurant hadn't changed a bit since I had worked there so many years ago. I recognized the voice of my old boss, Fred, coming from the kitchen, and asked one of the waitresses if I could speak to him. He didn't remember me at first but that soon changed; I was something of a superstar in the field of dishwashing back in the day. "I owe you some money, Fred. I ate lots of burgers in between washes and I never paid you for them." Fred looked surprised and refused to take any money, but he expressed his gratitude to me, and said it was the first time anyone had returned after so many years to pay a debt. Walking from the store, I smiled as my son asked, "Why did you do that, Dad?" The answer was easy: "I was tired of feeling guilty every time I drove past the restaurant. It's never too late to try and fix a mistake." I paused. "Do you want to stop by the park again?" You'll never guess what he said.

Hope

Life isn't always easy. Upon arriving on this planet, we are never guaranteed that things will always go smoothly. That is the case for all of us, no matter whom we are or where we come from. And I know a lot about that, personally. In September of 1990, when I was eleven years old, I was hit by a car on my first day of school in the seventh grade. My accident left me paralyzed from the neck down and on a ventilator. Before I could go on with my life, I had to come to the understanding that, despite this situation, I was still the same person that I always was. My life wasn't over -- not nearly, it was just different. Even if our experiences have not been exactly the same, most of us have undergone similar things in our lives. There are difficulties that, regardless of specific form, we will all confront. Especially in these confusing times, there are pressures placed on us by society to behave in certain ways, often without our knowledge of their possible consequences. But, in order to deal effectively with these challenges in our lives, we must first have a keen understanding of who we truly are inside. It is when we come to that understanding that we know that we don't have to succumb to any obstacle. None of us has to be identified by the problems that we face. When I was twelve years old and in the hospital, I couldn't help but notice that some of the kids that were there with me were giving up and not seeing that their futures were still bright. I wondered why this was so. I wondered why certain people couldn't see all of the possibilities that they still had, even if these possibilities weren't the ones they had originally planned on. I wondered what it was in some people that helped them through their difficult times and enabled them to focus positively on their future. Over the years, though, I think I have come to an answer for myself -- it comes down to a matter of hope. When I say hope, I don't mean the things that we wish for, like, "I hope I can go to the movies this weekend." I mean, hope in a broader sense, which involves feelings of self worth, an ability to adjust to life's many changes, and an ability to find different ways to tackle problems. It involves feeling proud of whom you are and knowing that your personal experiences, no matter what they have been, have helped make you the unique person that you are. It is with hope that I was able to overcome the difficulties I have faced and it is with hope that each one of you can do the same. Life progresses with an almost constant series of challenges, some bigger than others, all of

which we must face. Although they may seem unconquerable at times, the obstacles in our lives are often just detours that we have to take in order to meet our ultimate goals. No matter what sort of adversity or challenge you might face, you can always believe that, with hope, it can be conquered and, in the end, you will be stronger for it. Life does go on -- it always does. The path that you ultimately take, however, may not be the one that you had originally expected.

Humility

My dad was an ex-Marine sergeant and it showed. Every weekend, we were awakened by o' eight-hundred hours and fed a warm bowl of oatmeal. Then it was chore time, and no kid dared ask to go play until everything was done. Dad also had a unique form of punishment. While other kids got grounded for major infractions to household rules, we got a hair cut. Not just any cut, either. We got an official Marine Corps buzz. It was never a secret in our neighborhood as to which kid in my family had got in trouble. We learned really young that we could not hide our misconduct from others. And being a rebel never seemed to appeal to any of us. At the time, I thought my father was a little on the other side of insane, but now he seems wiser than I ever imagined. I offer a little more variety to my kids at breakfast and all the chores are done by noon. But I still have to struggle to hide my smile as I sit watching my six-year-old scowling in the barber's chair.

Including Others

I learned a lot from my father, but not from lectures. No matter what he was doing, he always seemed to find a way to include me. He even gave me an old razor handle, minus the blade of course, so that I could join in the morning ritual. I was cool. Dad and I stayed close. I always felt like he understood me and that I could talk to him about everything. And I learned a lot about him, too. Now that I am a father I realize why he did what he did. By doing things with my kids, I see them learning by my example. More importantly, if they are doing things with me, I know what they are doing. And hopefully they won't get as many nicks when they are old enough to use the blade.

Integrity

"But Dad, your crew already finished that floor," I complained as I helped him load the truck with flooring supplies. "It's not finished unless it is done right," was his quiet reply. I had been helping my father every summer with his flooring business. I had installed floors in countless houses all over the city. I began to feel like I had lived on every street in town. All I wanted to do today was to head off with my friends. Yet here I was riding back to a job site with my dad. As we entered the home, I looked around carefully to try and see just what exactly needed our attention. The owners had hired us last week to install hardwood floors throughout the main level and I was more than tired of piecing together little planks of wood. As we entered what looked to be a home office, I guess he saw the puzzled look on my face. "Look here," he said as he pointed near a built-in bookshelf. "There is a warped plank that is beginning to crack. If we leave it the way it is, it will cause problems for the owner down the road." As we finished replacing the defective plank, I finally realized why my father's business was so successful... and why I had so many floors to install.

Learning

My father loved cars. I remember watching how he would light up and speak differently whenever he described an engine or reminisced about his favorite restoration. For almost fifteen years he had been working at his auto-repair and body shop doing what he loved most and doing it fairly. As a boy I had the opportunity to see him deal with his customers and witness for myself the value of honesty and the reward for hard work. Every Saturday morning he would take me into his garage and show me what he was working on. He explained the repairs, the techniques, the tools, and the trade. Most of it I didn't understand and I didn't really need to. Watching the shine in his eye whenever he got excited after showing me something new and seeing the smile on his face when he fixed a problem was more than enough. His passion for living inspired my passion for life and ultimately changed it. His example taught me things I never thought I would know and made me teach myself to become a better person. It was more than just showing me cars. It was showing me how to live.

Listening

It is every kid's dream. Here I was with my new learner's permit sitting behind the wheel of the family car. The light turned green and I was just beginning to press down on the accelerator. "Don't go!" my father said sternly. I looked ahead, but saw no reason to not go forward, so I pressed down on the pedal. "Hit the brake!" shouted my father. His loud voice startled me to the point that my reflexes took over. I stomped on the brake just as a huge cement truck came screaming across the intersection through a red light. It jumped over the sidewalk, smashed a fence, and finally came to rest against a pile of dirt in a nearby construction site. My father had done what I neglected to do. He had looked both ways and saw the fast moving truck and could see it wasn't slowing down. I was so excited to be driving, that I was focused only on the changing light. It was only one of the many times that I have been grateful that I have listened to my father's advice, even those times when I couldn't quickly see why.

Live Your Dreams

My dad has always been a runner. Every morning at 4 A.M., he would quietly leave the house for his morning jog. It was his time to think, plan for the day, and figure out how he could save the world... all before breakfast. I always admired my dad and wanted to be like him, but there was no way I could run as far as he did. Each morning as we would run together, he encouraged me and would take my mind off the distance by teaching me about setting goals and living my dreams. We ran a lot of small races together over the years. Each time without fail, my dad would finish well ahead of me, yet he would always return to the last mile marker so we could cross the finish line together. It was finally time to run our first half marathon. I had always dreamt of running a big race, but even with my dad's confidence in me, I was nervous and unsure. When I received the news that he had to travel out of town on the race day, I was devastated. I had never run that far by myself and felt very discouraged. My dad reminded me, "Living your dreams can only begin by placing one foot in front of the other. You can do this. I believe in you." It just wasn't the same. When I hit mile 11, I was ready to quit. I had barely enough energy to make it one more mile. I knew, unless something changed, that I would have to walk the rest of the way. It was just too hard. As I approached mile 12, I was struggling. In the distance, I thought I saw a familiar face. I rubbed my eyes and hoped I wasn't hallucinating, but it looked like my dad! It was! He had changed his plans to drive 4 hours so he could meet me at the last mile... just like always. I could barely hold back the tears as we crossed that finish line together. I learned how to live my dreams because, through his example, my dad showed me how.

Love

“What are those for?” she asked smiling at the bouquet of flowers. Such an unnecessary question from the woman who has carried me through the trials of life. This is the mother that worked all day and dealt with kids at night while I worked my way through graduate school. This is the wife that sat by my side and fought back her tears as I endured an agonizing year of chemotherapy. This is the woman that carefully budgeted our income to allow us to afford our new home. Today the sun shines, but clouds may come again. I don’t know what the future will bring, but I do know that my love for her has grown and I never have to question her love for me. And she wonders what the flowers are for.

Loyalty

My best friend and I had spent many lazy summers talking about how we would someday own our own business. At age ten, we didn’t have a clue as to what that business would be, but we knew we would do it together. We were inseparable, even the day we went roaming in a nearby canyon. As we hiked up through the brush, my friend’s shaggy old sheep dog wagged along behind. Without warning, the ground gave way below us and we tumbled into darkness. Somehow our fall only caused bruises and scrapes, but we now looked up to the small hole of sunlight high above, with no way out. The only thing we could see was a beam of dusty light and the silhouette of that shaggy dog looking down and barking at us. “Go home!” shouted my friend, “Go home!” After a few whimpers, he disappeared from our view. An hour or so later, the sunlight began to fade as night fast approached. We were getting scared and thought for sure we would be down there for the night, when we began to hear the faint barking. It was that old dog coming back. Soon the barking grew louder and we saw flashlights pierce down through the darkness. A rope was dropped down to us and we joined our rescuers on the surface. My friend and I stayed close and reached our dream of working together. We still suffer occasional bruises and scrapes in the business world, but a picture of that old sheep dog sits on my desk to remind us that together we can succeed.

Opportunity

The biggest storm of the year just dumped a foot and a half of snow on our city. But instead of curling up next to the heater with a book, my husband is in the garage dusting off the snow blower. Most people would see new piles of snow as a nuisance, but my husband sees it as a big, white heap of opportunity. Through the roar of the engine and clouds of gasoline-scented exhaust, he pushes his way out to the sidewalk and goes up one side of the street and down the other. He doesn't just take care of the elderly woman a few doors down, but clears the driveway of the business executive across the street. It has become a well-known fact that no one on our block needs to strain their back with the shovel, or even put on their coat after a snowfall. They simply wait for the growl of the snow blower and the wave from my husband telling them their sidewalk and driveway is clear. This is how he makes friends out of neighbors.

Optimism

“C’mon, man. There’s nothing up here but sky!” I remember that long ago day on the trampoline. My brother always had such a great outlook on life. Nothing seemed to get him down. He rarely complained and everyone seemed to be his friend. As we grew older, he went on to start his own company. Even when facing serious setbacks, he always found a bright side to hold on to. Eventually his work paid off and his company was a success. He has always been my hero.

Following his enthusiasm for life, I have also worked my way in the business world. And whenever I feel down and discouraged, I look up and remember his voice gleefully shouting that summer day, “There’s nothing up here but sky.”

Patience

My fondest memory of my Dad occurred one summer day out in the middle of a mountain lake. “Don’t jerk it. Just reel it in real slow,” my father whispered. But it was so difficult. I hated to wait for anything. I usually took forever to decide what I really wanted, but once I decided, I wanted it right now. And right now I wanted to catch a fish. My father seemed to sense my impatience. “The big ones didn’t get that way by snapping the first thing to hit the water,” he said quietly. “You’ll soon find that anything big and worthwhile usually takes a lot of time.” Then, with a smile that I will never forget, he added, “After all, I’ve already spent twelve years on you.”

Perseverance

One inch at a time. That is how I climb and that is how I live. Sure, the summit is my goal, but without each carefully calculated move, I could never make it to the top. Each small step and each giant reach presents a unique challenge. As I move up the cliff, I recognize characteristics of the rock and then adapt learned techniques to advance further toward the goal. My father taught me perseverance by his example. I remember him going back to college when I was a little boy. He worked all day, attended classes in the evening and then came home to study. I don’t know how he did it, but somehow the yard work got done and he kept the car maintained. I never have asked him how he managed, but he did. When I was just ten years old, my father received his degree. It took him many years, but he reached his goal and then moved on to other challenges. As I reach the summit, I look back down and enjoy the moment. Then I gather my gear and start planning my next climb. One inch at a time.

Persistence

When I was a little girl, my grandmother would often get out her violin and play it to me at naptime. I remember wanting more than anything to be able to play as well as her. She began teaching me on my sixth birthday. I was excited just to hold the well-crafted instrument and make any kind of sound that resembled music, but frustration soon set in. After only a few months, I was upset that I could not play as well as my grandmother. I told her that I wanted to give up. She smiled and said that the choice was mine as she gently lifted the violin from my hands. After only a few days without holding that wonderful instrument, I was ready to go back and continue with my lessons. Grandmother happily handed me the violin from its case and we proceeded. That incident replayed itself many times over the years until my first try-out with the youth symphony. As I prepared for the audition, my grandmother handed me a picture of her sitting on the front row of violins in a large symphony. Her smile in the photo was as recognizable as the one on her face at that moment. On the back of the photo were written the words, “First chair for a most persistent girl.” My grandmother passed away a few years ago, but that picture remains in my violin case. I pause and look at it every time I remove my violin to take my place with the Metropolitan Symphony—on the front row.

Respect

The procession was the same every week. We both would jump out of the car and run to give Grandma a big hug right before she invited us inside where fresh cookies were waiting. My Grandfather always stayed in the study waiting for us to come to him. When we did, it was magical. We sat for hours listening to his stories while our Grandma brought us cookies and milk until we couldn't eat anymore. Mostly he talked about the war. Amazing stories of bravery, courage, nobility, and grace. He talked of men that he hadn't seen for over forty years, men that he would recognize if he saw them even then, men that he could still call brother. He always looked Dave in the eye and told him that he had the same heart those men did. He would put his hand on my head and explain how much strength my Grandma gave him during those hard times and how much strength I gave others in the same way. "Love is a powerful thing," he would say. And he was right. Every 4th of July we would stand outside his house as he raised the flag. He always took his hat off and handed it to Dave who held it over his heart just as he had been taught. We looked at the flag together remembering the stories and thinking of what it all meant. Watching his face as he unfolded the fabric is something I will never forget. The single tear on his cheek as the memories came rushing back was always enough to make me cry. He saw a just cause and risked his life to fight for that cause. This sacrifice taught me one of the greatest lessons I have ever learned. "Respect yourself, respect others, and above all respect what you believe."

Responsibility

From the way my parents were acting just days before my 10th birthday, I thought for sure that I would finally get a horse of my own. I spent hours dreaming of riding across the fields; hand feeding it apples and carrots in the barn; and the fancy saddle that would make all my friends jealous. I squealed with excitement when my father walked in to my party and announced that he had a special gift for his birthday girl. Then my heart sank as he opened his cupped hands and presented me with a baby chick. My saddle dreams were dashed. Even though the disappointment was evident on my face, he smiled and handed me the chick. "It's all yours. I think you're ready to take care of this chick by yourself." That chick turned out to be harder to raise than I thought. I had to mend all the small holes in the chicken yard fence, feed her and make sure she had fresh water. Some days the weather seemed too bad to have to trudge out to the chicken coop, but my father would remind me that my chicken was relying on me for its care and out the door I would go. My eleventh birthday rolled around without anticipation. I had given up on my dream for a horse. As I walked into the kitchen that morning, my father pointed toward a large gift-wrapped box by the back door. Tearing open the wrapper, I found a beautiful saddle with a note that read, "Take this to your new friend in the barn. You've earned her."

Right Choices

They were just stories, but every night my parents and I would gather around and read from a book of fairy tales. Brave knights would rescue princesses, small elves would come to the aid of people in need, and little children would get into trouble for telling a lie. Each found a place in my heart, especially the princess who had to decide which path to follow through a strange, enchanted forest. A few years ago, layoffs at work left me frantically seeking new employment. I searched through the paper and called friends for leads. After many interviews, and much discouragement, it happened. Not one, but three job offers came on the same day. Each was in a different city and each would provide the income I needed. Which to choose, I could not tell. Recruiters made each one sound so perfect, yet I knew that one would be better than the rest.

Which one, I pondered. As I reviewed each company and my own personal goals, I began to feel at peace with one particular offer. But I was still confused. As I sat thinking, the voice of my mother came back from my memory as she read the fairy tales of my youth. The princess was in the forest and confused as the animals all tried to give her conflicting advice. Suddenly, I knew. And the choice has given me a career of which to be proud. The words that I remembered? "When you need a friend to trust, listen to your heart."

Sacrifice

As I walked up the sidewalk toward the university, I noticed a lone bike rider struggling up the steep grade. Suddenly, the chain slipped and the rider lost momentum and began to roll backwards. She caught herself in time to avoid a spill and I watched her climb off and slump down next to the bike. As I got closer, I could tell that she was crying. "Tough break," I thought as I glanced at my watch and noticed that I only had five minutes until my first class. I quickly picked up my pace and started up that same hill. As I walked, I remembered the time as a kid when I was trying to fix my first flat tire on my bike. Even though he was in a suit and leaving for work, my neighbor saw me and came over to help me fix the tire. After a few more steps, I turned and walked back toward the woman who was now struggling to wipe away her tears. "Can I help?" I asked as I approached. "Know anything about stupid bikes?" she replied. I looked the situation over and was quickly able to return the chain to its proper position. "Looks like this was tangled in the sprocket," I said holding up the greasy remains of a weed. A slight smile cracked through her tear-streaked face. "Thanks for helping me," she said as her smile began to grow. "No problem," I replied as I turned and started back up the hill. Even with grease on my hands, the uphill walk seemed easier with the joy of actually helping to make someone's day a little brighter. It was worth being a few minutes late.

Self-Esteem

My son Justin was born with Cerebral Palsy. At first we were worried about how he would adjust to being different than those around him; but Justin's determination, warm smile, and zest for life have brought admiration and appreciation from everyone with whom he comes in contact. So many times in the middle of a rough day, I simply look at him and everything comes into perspective. Justin's first love is baseball and for several years he has played with the Miracle League. When he is on the baseball field, he is a part of a team like all of his friends and is treated just like any other kid. Through this experience, he has developed a strong sense of self-esteem. He also has been able to discover his unique talents instead of focusing on his disabilities. He has realized that CP does not have to limit who he is and what he does. He loves to say, "So what if I have Cerebral Palsy? I can still do it!" Justin is incredibly strong and he has taught me that life is a journey with endless chances to become more than what we are and gain more than we currently have. We have to make the choice to believe in ourselves and take hold of our dreams.

Service

"I brought you some ice cold lemonade," she said smiling as she held out the bowl of fresh lemons. All I could do was laugh. Here we go again. Last week it was fresh baked chocolate chip cookies as she stood with a grocery bag containing flour, brown sugar and chocolate chips. The week before she said a fresh pot of stew as she presented a basket of fresh vegetables. My neighbor was amazing. At least once a week she shows up with the ingredients for some special treat for my family and comes in to fix it. Most people would simply fix the dish and stop by to drop it off, but not her. And I couldn't be happier about it. Since my surgery last month, it has

been very difficult to get around the kitchen and even harder to get out of the house to visit anyone. I looked forward to not only my neighbor's cooking, but also the time we have to visit as she prepares those delicious treats in my kitchen. Her humor isn't bad either.

Sharing

The shouting. The screaming. The fighting. That was the breaking point for me as I poured out my woes to my mother. "How can I get them to share as well as we did as kids?" I pleaded. Laughter was her reply. "Well, thanks a lot, mom," I said. "I'm sorry," she chuckled, "but you didn't always share." She went on to explain about the "Box of Misbehaved Toys." Every time we fought over a toy, she would quietly take it and put it into the box. Yes, I did remember that box. I also remember it wasn't always fair since one person may have caused all the commotion. But my mother was consistent. No matter the reason for the struggle, the toy disappeared into the box for one week. No questions asked, and no chance of parole. My siblings and I soon learned that sharing a toy was better than losing it. Often, one person would decide to just wait for a time when no one else was playing with the toy rather than fight and lose it. It wasn't a perfect system, but I tried it anyway. That box was a shock to my kids and it was close to full within a few days. As the weeks progressed, I noticed the box was emptier and the arguing was less. Today I heard quiet music to my ears as my son said to his sister, "That's OK, you can play with it."

Soul

The story of our lives is written in the lines of our hands. She came to this country as a little girl with her family -- hoping for a better life. She found hardship, struggle and a way to survive. And yet, it was better. Her hands held a hoe for hours each day chopping weeds down endless rows of beans. She sheared sheep alongside the men, cooked meals, held babies, and prayed for rain. There were no problems she had not come up against. It was a life of work. She ate what she planted and drank the water that flowed on her family's land. When she spoke, it was always advice. And people listened. What little she had, she shared with those who had less. Everyone who came into my grandmother's circle of quiet love left better for it. Her endurance gave hope to those around her who were still tempest-tossed. When they looked to her, she could offer very little, but what she had was valuable. The light from her soul.

Strength

Growing up is tough. Sometimes all that's needed is someone to lean on. For many years, it was mom. My mother had her own problems, but when I needed her, she was always there. Her strength came from somewhere very deep. I knew she wouldn't break, even when I unloaded all my little-boy problems. Her strength made me stronger and gave me courage to try things others thought were impossible. A helping hand is always strong enough to lift both of you.

Teaching by Example

During the school year, my dad volunteered after work as a crossing guard. Nothing could convince him to leave early and abandon his duty to safely guide children across the street -- not freezing rains, a bad case of the flu, or a hot meal on the dinner table. Every time I saw him in his bright orange crossing guard vest, I felt a swell of pride because of his concern for and commitment to others. My dad was the kind of guy who helped anyone, anytime. When an embarrassed woman in front of us at the checkout stand in the grocery store was a few dollars short and couldn't pay for her purchases, my dad stepped up and covered the bill. When a driver

tried to change lanes in rush-hour traffic, my dad always let him in. He left big tips for waitresses, and helped my mom carry in the groceries without being asked. I know that my dad wasn't intentionally teaching me lessons on pitching in or being thoughtful, he just cared about others and wanted to help when he could. In fact, I don't know that he was even aware that I was watching. But I was. As the saying goes, his actions spoke louder than any words would have. I like to think of these actions as a family tradition. Now I watch for ways to help those around me. Not a day goes by that I don't have the opportunity to help someone out or volunteer my time, and teach my own children by example. One of these days I just might make that orange crossing guard vest a part of my own wardrobe.

Tolerance

I remember walking down the hall of the elementary school with the principal to my new third grade classroom. As the door opened, my biggest fear was confirmed. I was the only African-American in the room. I felt all twenty-eight pairs of eyes looking right at me. The teacher half-smiled as she showed me to my seat. Wishing to be back in my old town and my familiar school was all I could think about as I struggled with the emotions welling up inside me. I didn't expect it, nor did I know how to react, when one boy came over at recess and asked me if I wanted to play ball. He led me toward the main group and announced that I was going to be on his team. Grumbles could be heard, but it was obvious that this boy was a leader and no one objected. We became instant friends. Through the years, I watched this boy befriend every new student and consider myself lucky to be part of an ever-growing circle of friends — a friendship without boundaries.

Trust

"It's just over this ridge," she said as I held back a smile. For almost an hour she had been greeting me this way whenever I finally caught up with her. Somehow she always convinced me to go on one of these hikes with her every year. Let's just say I don't exactly have a natural talent for this sort of thing. "Almost here," she said as she held out her hand and gently pulled me to the ledge beside her. It had been like this all of our lives. She loved pushing herself and pulling others out of difficult situations. I always tried to be right there whenever she needed someone, but more often than not it was the other way around. She was one of those people that was easy to predict because every single decision she made seemed to make perfect sense. I have always been able to ask her for advice and I never hesitate to use it. "We're always there for each other, and that's what makes us friends," she says. All that I have to do in return is pretend to enjoy myself once a year whenever we go hiking. "Is it really over this ridge?" I ask as she races to the top. "Trust me," she yells as I start to smile again.

Unity

Heavy rains had inundated the rivers above our home and a small dam broke in the middle of the night. As muddy waters gushed down the street, emergency vehicles wailed up and down the block, evacuating everyone. It wasn't until the following morning that the extent of the destruction became known. While no one was hurt, many houses were damaged and neighbors were distraught by their losses. One woman stood crying on the expanse of ankle-deep mud that used to be lawn; she was getting married in two months and had stored her gifts and wedding dress in the basement now filled with four feet of water. The afternoon following the flood, neighbors with shovels congregated in front of a house and began moving the thick mud off of the porch and lawn. When they were done with one home, they moved on to the next. Barbeques

were set up at intervals and several women made runs to the grocery store to keep the workers fed. Another group dug up the trunks of trees that had been broken by the water and replanted saplings. Children built forts and dug holes in the piles of mud. Surprisingly, the flood brought valuable changes to our neighborhood. A group of women started a sewing circle to make a quilt for the woman who lost her wedding gifts. They became friends and started a neighborhood team that meets and plans community projects each month. The men got to know each other while shoveling mud from each other's cellars and now one can't be working under the car or on a new roof without his neighbors stopping by to help. Thanks to our new unity, we have a beautiful, safe, and friendly block. We are all happy that the neighborhood has not returned to normal.

Vision

Despite losing his vision at the age of 13, Erik Weihenmayer has become one of the celebrated and accomplished athletes in the world. Re-defining what it means to be blind, Erik has transformed the image of blindness and opened up the minds of people around the world. He has never let his blindness interfere with his passion for an exhilarating and fulfilling life. On May 25, 2001, Erik became the first blind climber in history to reach the summit of the world's highest mountain, Mt. Everest. At the age of 34, Erik became one of less than 100 individuals to climb all of the Seven Summits - the highest peaks on each of the seven continents. He completed this incredible accomplishment on September 5, 2002 when he stood on top of Mt. Kosciusko in Australia. Erik is a former middle school teacher and wrestling coach who has made his way on to the cover of *Time*, *Outside*, and *Climbing* magazines. He has also been featured on the *Oprah Winfrey Show*, NBC's *Today*, the *Tonight Show*, and *Nightly News with Tom Brokaw*. In addition to being a world-class athlete, Erik is also the author of the best-selling book, *Touch the Top of the World*. Most of all, he is a proud husband, and a father to his young daughter, Emma.