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“Life is a promise. Fulfill it.”

Mother Teresa

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DEAR ETHAN:

In my first letter I want to share with you the most important lesson that I have ever learned in my life. It’s a lesson I hope you’ll always remember and one that I pray will guide you in the years to come.

When I was in college studying theology and psychology, one of the priests we all admired and respected would give us a quiz every Friday on the material he taught us during the week. His quizzes were always the same, twenty-five questions, four points each, and so easy that just about everyone in our class always earned an “A.”

So on the Friday before Thanksgiving vacation it was no surprise when Father Donatus distributed probably the easiest quiz of the semester to his twenty students. As I looked around the room I could see my fellow classmates zipping through the answers with big smiles on their faces knowing full well that they most likely achieved another high grade for their effort.

Today, however, there would be an unexpected surprise. When the first student brought his paper forward, Father

Donatus said that on this day there would be a “Part 2” to the quiz that would be worth fifty of the possible one hundred points. As he distributed to each student the paper containing the second half of the examination, there were looks of puzzlement and bewilderment as they returned to their seats. And when I received my paper, I understood their visible frustration.

The second section of the quiz comprised one question worth fifty points. That was bad enough. What made it worse was the question itself: “Write down the first name of the woman who cleans our school.” Huh? “Write down the first name of the woman who cleans our school.” What the heck did that have to do with theology or psychology?

Well, our classroom was located in a pretty small education building and on many occasions I had seen the woman whose name was worth fifty points. I passed her coming out of the cleaning closet or near the bathrooms with her mop and pail, and several times on the stairwell. The problem was that I didn’t know her first name and I didn’t want to hazard a guess for fear of looking really stupid. I left the question blank.

I couldn’t begin to tell you, Ethan, how mad I was at Father Donatus for asking what I thought was really an unfair question that had nothing to do with the subject matter that we were studying. It made no sense. I already knew that I failed before I even had my paper graded.

When class convened on the following Monday, Father Donatus returned our quizzes and no one in the class passed. Several of us earned fifty points and had a huge, bright red

“F” in the center of each paper. No one knew the first name of the woman who cleaned our school.

When we asked Father Donatus why knowing that information was important in the field of psychology and theology, I’ll never forget his answer. He was sitting at his desk, took off his glasses and paused for a moment. Then he began quietly and succinctly, “Gentlemen ... you can read all of the books and study all of the principles of religion and behavioral science and become very smart scholars, even recognized in your chosen field of endeavor. But none of that really matters ... because the single most important purpose for living is to know people, to engage people, and to uplift people.”

In my life’s journey to date, I never learned a more important lesson. Think about it, Ethan. If the majority of people living today took that lesson to heart and acted accordingly, what a magnificent world it would be for everyone.

And I was gently reminded of the importance of knowing people, engaging them, and uplifting them when you were born. I was standing in your Mom’s hospital room as you rested in her arms, thinking about what was written in the book of the prophet Isaiah, “Before you were born, I knew you. I called you by name.” Yes, of the people in that hospital room on November 2, you were the one who had been most recently in God’s company. He knew you. He called you by name. And He sent you into this world created in His image and likeness.

I made a commitment that day to know you, engage you,

and uplift you as your grandfather. What I never realized is just how much you would do the same for me, for your parents, and even for complete strangers in your very first year of life.

Until I experienced the joy of watching you grow and develop in those early months, I forgot what I had learned when your Dad was born, that “unless you become like a little child, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

Without question, you mirrored that sense of wonder and amazement that makes life a miracle. Your grandmother and I would take you to the mall and watch you discover everything from the escalators to the Disney store to the ice skating rink. Your eyes told the story of your heart. You were fearless, bounced back from falls and frustrations, and interacted with people from all walks of life with a wave and a smile. Even Santa Claus wasn't frightening as you slapped him a high five and returned to visit him several times during the Christmas season.

All of the wonderful qualities that I saw in you as a child I'm sad to say that I rarely see in adults today and even in myself on more occasions than I care to admit. Life is curious. In our youngest years we seem to reflect most closely those attributes of life that God wants us to employ to make the world a better place. As we grow older and embrace the demands of family and career, our “busyness” seems to lure us away from that basic mission articulated so poignantly by Father Donatus. We invest our energy searching for an answer to the question, “What is it that I really want?” Finally, as the reality of our mortality creeps

into our consciousness on a more frequent basis, thoughts of our relationship to God hopefully prompt a new question that begs an answer, “What is wanted of me?”

Ethan, I’m not suggesting that the most important lesson in my life become the most important lesson in yours. Sure, I hope that what I have learned provides some guidance for your life’s journey, as I said earlier, but you have to learn your own lessons, make your own decisions, and experience life on your terms. What I do know for certain, though, is that whatever effort you put into knowing, engaging, and uplifting people throughout your life, it will come back to you a hundredfold in the quality of your personal and professional relationships.

Finally, Ethan, I want you to know that Eleanor was her name ... the woman who cleaned my school. She was widowed, had five children, and cleaned our education building on campus to make ends meet. When she died unexpectedly, I was fortunate to be able to attend the Mass of Resurrection at her church, meet each one of her children, and thank them for the impact that their mother had on my life.

I love you, Ethan.

Grandpa