

Dear Mike,

I am writing you this letter because in two more days you start to school. This means you are taking your first big step out into the world.

It is a big step.

The night before you went to register at school you went to bed early and when I came to your bed to kiss you goodnight the moonlight flooded your bed and I found you lying on your pillow with an old eyeless teddy bear clutched to your breast. I always come to your room to kiss you goodnight but never before had I found you holding your teddy bear. It was then that I realized how much your little heart must have pounded as you thought about the next day with feelings of both excitement and dread and how you had grabbed the familiar old bear for security. My own eyes filled as I stumbled over your little red book satchel crammed with pencils and paper and crayons which you had placed so carefully at the foot of your bed.

For somehow I knew that this was your bag packed for a journey you are beginning.

The next day we went to school. Just you and me.

When we walked into the school you hung onto my hand and I remember it was sweaty even though it was a cool morning and it was a long time before you turned it loose. As we left, however, you didn't even reach for my hand--you walked tall and proud with a smile of satisfaction on your face.

I realize that somehow this was symbolic--it symbolizes the breaking of another thread that held you tightly to your home.

For six years now you have looked to me and your mother for all the answers and your world of exploration has been restricted to our front lawn. Lately, you have been bringing home questions that you have picked up from your playmates and your mother and I exchanged glances--a knowledge that you are beginning to hear the call to leave the nest and try your own wings. That your mind has become restless at second-hand answers and you are ready to discover for yourself.

My son, that is what frightens me. For you see these six years you and I have shared have really been the years in which your character has been forming. Your mind will grow, regardless of me. But the decisions you make, the choices you make, will emerge to a great extent from the values I've tried to teach you and from the meaning of life I have tried to interpret for your little mind. Now I can only let you step out with faith and hope and I'm kinda scared. For son, they talk about a generation gap but there is no gap between us. Just like the other day, when I was sitting in my chair reading a book, and you came up and tugged at my sleeve. I looked up into your face and your little eyes crinkled and with a smile you said, "Are you that daddy that had a heart attack and can't play ball with his son?" And I threw down that book and jumped up and said "I sure am not." We ran out in the yard and for a long time we played ball just you and me. You're always stopping me as I walk by and saying, "Are you my buddy?" And I say, "I sure am." There is no generation gap.

Oh, of course, there is a generation gap because whenever you and I look at anything, I'm looking through years of experience. You're looking through eyes of eagerness--untested ideas. Naturally they are going to be different. But son, I hope there is never a communication gap between us--that's what is important. I promise that I will always listen to you, if you will always listen to me. I won't always agree with you and you won't always agree with me but it is awfully important that we talk and that we listen to what each has to say. You know I read a story once about a man riding the subway in New York City. From where he was sitting he watched two fathers and their daughters seated across the aisle from one another. He noticed that one child was dressed to the hilt, so beautifully, immaculately dressed. She was seated beside her father who was equally well dressed and well groomed; his face behind a newspaper. On the other side of the aisle was another little girl about the same age but she was a tom boy who looked as if she had just come in from play. And the father looked as if he didn't care too much about his appearance either. He, too, was reading a newspaper. The little girls eyed one another and then got caught up in their own thing. After a while the little tom boy reached up and took her father's hand and rubbed his wedding band. And when she did the father put down his newspaper and gave her a great big smile and then the two of them sat there and played games together, having a big time. The father saw he was being observed and he explained, "I promised my daughter a long time ago that if she ever felt that I was neglecting her or I didn't want to be with her to just rub my wedding ring and I would stop whatever I was doing, no matter what it was, and I would give my undivided attention to her." The little girl seated across the aisle heard what the father said and she kept eyeing her own father's wedding band. After a while she slowly reached up and rubbed his wedding band, and he dropped the paper from in front of his face, gave her a very stern look and said, "What do you mean, you know better than to bother me when I'm reading." The little girl's face paled and the father went back to his reading. My son, when my time is too important for you then I've lost a sense of value. I promise, if you will, to keep those communication lines open.

Son there's one other thing that I want to talk to you about. That is the importance of keeping an open mind. You're going to be exposed to so many new ideas, so many new concepts. Don't close your mind and say this is how it is--disregarding the position anybody else has to take. You can only learn when you become exposed to alternatives. Don't resent alternatives--take them seriously--then work for your own conclusions. And don't be afraid to take your position, it might be different from others, but it is vitally important that you reach your decision on your own and not just because somebody else says so.

You know when we walked in that school together, you were so proud of that little red book satchel. Then you discovered that no one else had his book satchel. It embarrassed you. You handed it to me and you said, "Daddy, will you carry this for me?" Well son, you be proud to carry that book satchel, whether or not anyone else has one. It is so important to be yourself and not just what everybody else expects you to be. That's the grandest thing God gave you, your own individuality. Oh, son there will be times in your life, when the crowd pressures you and you're going to feel that you're left on the outside if you don't join the crowd. But let me tell you, son, the people who have changed the world and formulated the destiny of the world have always been people willing to stand alone, who were able to take a step ahead and wait for others to catch up.

You're going to learn a new vocabulary, you're going to read words on toilet wall, hear words spit out in anger, going to hear words whispered behind giggles--dirty words, obscene words. Son, if you want to live with this kind of a vocabulary, then the place to go is down in the gutter; because that's where they are bred. You don't want to live in the gutter. A lot of people have the idea that unless you sprinkle your conversation with a lot of four letter words that your not in--your not sophisticated. But son, I don't know anybody that can speak at all who can't say dirty words. That doesn't make anybody important. You know, every once in a while you come into the house and hand your mother or me a little flower that you broke off its stem--such a beautiful thing. You don't bring weeds. You trample the weeds and you bring the flowers because they are beautiful. Well, son, words are just like those flowers and weeds. Some are beautiful and some are ugly. Some are clean and some are dirty. But, the first requisite for a great mind is a clean mind. I hope you'll remember that.

Then you'll learn words like "nigger", "white trash." That's unfortunate because we have shielded you from words like that. Maybe we should have exposed you to them so they wouldn't be strange, you would understand what they mean. But son, we hate words like that. Now you've got to face them. Please don't ever judge anybody by what he looks like, what's on the outside--go down inside, and you'll discover that there are a lot of beautiful black people. There's an awful lot of ugly black people. You'll discover there's an awful lot of beautiful white people and you'll find that there's a lot of ugly white people. Son, as you grow up, I want you to help make this a kind of world in which everybody is beautiful. When you don't look down upon someone because he is different.

You see Son, I remember when I wasn't much older than you and I was in school. There was a little girl in my class from a poor family. She didn't have many clothes and she wore the same ones day after day until they began to smell. We laughed at her and called her names; we called her "water lily" and she cried. And the more she cried, the more we called her names. I remember that little fellow who came to school one day wearing his sister's outgrown shoes. We said, "Sissy, sissy, wearing your sister's shoes." He cried, he slipped into the classroom and took them off and put them into his desk and went barefoot for the rest of the day. What we didn't realize was that he must have cried that morning when his mother put them on him. And I kinda guess that she cried after she sent him out the front door wearing them.

Oh, how clearly I remember these two and how much I hope they don't remember me.

Son, when you grow up you'll find the same thing happening among adults. Remember as long as there are inequalities and any inequity in life our civilization is that much sick. You've got to help cure it. Your mind is stretching and growing and that is why we are sending you out from here onto its long journey. I know we're looking down a long trail but that journey has begun and every step that you take is bringing you nearer to what you ultimately will be.

Son, I want you to take care of that body that harbors your soul. We've tried to teach you that some things are right and some things are wrong but now there are going to be other people who say differently from us. You're going to have to make decisions for yourself.

You remember that day on vacation a few years ago when we stopped at a restaurant for lunch and a fellow sitting at a table next to ours ordered a beer. Your mother and I held our breath because we knew that at home when beer was shown on television you would screw up your face and say, "yukk." But you only pointed and said, "Look what he is drinking." And after we left we said, "Son, we don't believe that it is right to drink but let's never say anything to hurt someone who does."

But, son, I hope you never take a drink!

One of your finest possessions is a clear, healthy mind. Do you know that when you take a drink you begin to paralyze that beautiful thing. You destroy something of your personality in just those few minutes. The thing you ought to prize above everything else, you're abusing.

I remember a wedding I had and after the rehearsal we had a rehearsal dinner. It was a wonderful dinner and champagne was in back of everyone's plate. Many toasts were made to the bride and groom. One of the bride's maids was sitting across the table from me and I just couldn't keep my eyes off her, she was such an attractive girl--had such a wonderful personality. She was dressed and groomed to perfection. She had such a coy, quiet way about her. You know, after she had had two or three drinks her facial muscles began to sag, her eyes glazed, and she started talking a lot of 'gibberish.' And finally everybody grew tired of her and I thought, "Oh, what a tragedy-- such a beautiful thing to become so unpleasant."

Son, I'm not telling you that it is morally wrong to drink but I do say that you would be playing around with something that can destroy the beautiful in you. You do things when drinking that you wouldn't do with a clear mind.

And what I say about drinking is even more applicable to drugs. You will be facing that decision because more and more people are trying to make the use of drugs a legitimate thing. They call them mind-expanding drugs, but there's nothing mind-expanding about them; they're hallucinatory drugs. They mis-shape and mis-represent; they play tricks on you and you don't want that.

You will learn a lot about sex.

Your mother and I have tried to teach you everything you ought to know. We told you where you came from when you were just groping for words to ask the question. We've never been embarrassed talking about those things because we know that it is beautiful; we wanted you to think of it as being beautiful and not something to be ashamed of.

But, son, boys and girls are sleeping together, now--not married. They say that this is a new day and we've been set free from victorian ideals, but son, there's no freedom there. It just makes for years of regret. You see, we've told you all about sex, but in a few years your body will start reacting naturally with feelings of sex. And I want you to know it is natural and don't hide it. I don't want you to learn anything behind closed doors. I want you to learn it out in the open; be proud of it. Treasure it as one of the most meaningful gifts God gave you. Something that you share with another person as a reward for what you have already shared together; not something with which to begin a relationship but something which results from a significant relationship. Because, son, whenever you select that girl to be your wife, if you select her because you're sexually attracted to her and she chooses you because she is sexually attracted to you, the day will come when that sexual attraction will fade. Then you're caught in a web, a terrible web. It's a beautiful thing; let it remain beautiful-- don't smear it or smudge it.

Son, as you proceed in school you're going to be caught up in protest groups. That's a big concern to most of us, today. Well, son, I hope you become a protester. Don't stand on the sidelines and jeer at those who are in there protesting, because there are a lot of things in the world that need protesting. Martin Luther was a protester. Patrick Henry was a protester. Mahatma Gandhi was a protester. These were men who helped shape the course of history because they were courageous enough and were independent thinkers enough to protest the things that needed to be changed. Son, I hope you are in there slugging with both fists against the things in the world that need to be changed. But I hope your protest will be with reason and example. For you see, son, when you take other people's rights away from them because of a right you claim for yourself-- that's wrong. And when you heap obscenity upon those people who by their positions deserve your respect, son, that's not protest. When you close down universities and deface and burn, son, that's not protest, that's anarchy. What you are doing is destroying the foundations that you need in order to build. So get in there and you protest with your mind and you protest with your example. For you see, son, a lot of protesters today have become objects of protest, and the things that they are fighting for are lost sight of because of the feeling that is mounted up against them, personally. Now, son, if you want to grow long hair--that's all right. There's nothing wrong with long hair. If you want to wear love beads-- that's fine, I don't object at all. But son, when that long hair gets dirty and your clothes become smelly, and your appearance makes you become repulsive, your influence as a protester fades into your becoming an object of protest. I hope you'll remember that.

Well, you've packed your satchel and you're starting out on that journey. I wish I could go with you every step of the way, but I can't. But, son, I want you to know that wherever your journey carries you, your mother and I are back of you one hundred percent. And even when you make a wrong choice, that's all right-- we'll back you up. That doesn't mean that we condone it, it only means that we'll stick by you, no matter what. You can always come to us and know that you will have an understanding ear. But the greatest strength on which you'll learn to rely is yourself, and the spiritual companions you'll develop. Your mind will grasp the ideas and concepts of great men and suddenly you'll discover that they have been woven into the fiber of your mind and character. That's why it's so important that your intellectual and spiritual companions are of the proper sort.

You'll be answering your own questions. Son, it'll be a great day for me when I realize that you've got the resources within to answer the questions that now are being answered on the outside of you by other people.

Son, God is a familiar image to you because we speak of him freely in our home. Now, you'll start meeting people who disregard God and many who do not believe there is a God. Most of them will ignore spiritual things. They'll think mostly about material things. Be careful, son, it's easy to fall into that trap. You know, last week I spent three days in the company of the most brilliant, most incisive mind I have encountered. He is one of our world's leading nuclear physicists. Do you know what he said? He said he didn't give much serious attention to God as he was growing up but the deeper he went into the realm of science and discovered the dimensions of it; the more he encountered mysteries and the unknown, the more convinced he became of the reality and presence of God. Son, that's a pretty good recommendation.

Son, you don't ever have to apologize for a strong religious faith, because it is the greatest men and the most brilliant men who discover God apart from hearsay and insist on making a significant place for him in the scheme of things.

Well, I know it's not so important what your dad says; it's what you see in him that really counts. What I've said to you I've tried to do in my own life, but I know that I've made many mistakes. Still, I've always tried and I'm still trying. Just remember, son, when you stumble, just get up and try all over again.

Well, son, that's about it.

Love,
Dad