

Preface

Dear: Today is a memorable date for me: today your grandma and I have been married 36 years. Also, yesterday was my first day of retirement – so now I have time to do what I promised. And I'd better do it now; who knows how much time I have left.

Although I certainly don't expect you to remember, I promised you this for your sixteenth birthday. As I type this, you're four years old – as you so proudly display with your four little fingers pushed toward my face!

Last month, when grandma and I were looking after you and your brother, when your baby sister was born, you said your daddy told you I didn't believe in God and you wanted to know why. I said I'd explain it to you when you're older. The logic of your answer was impeccable: "I'm older now!"

But now that you're even older, perhaps you'll understand why I added: "I'll tell you when you're sixteen." [And let me mention my delight at your reactions: your pained expression, your disbelieving shoulders (shrugged to bear an enormous burden), your upturned hands (pleading for some rationality), all said: "Sixteen! Gimme a break! That's forever! Nobody lives that long!"]

I don't know why I so quickly chose 16 for your age when I'd tell you why I don't believe in god. (I used a lower-case 'g' in 'god', because I don't believe in any god.) Thinking about it, while driving home, I thought: maybe 21 would be better – or maybe 30. But at home, after I had time to think about it more, 16 seemed to be a good choice, even if hit only by luck! Let me explain why, derived from both some of my experiences and some of your father's.

When I was 16, two or three hundred years ago (sometimes grandfathers have a tendency to exaggerate), I began seriously to question the existence of God. I know that, because somewhat by luck, I have records of some of my thoughts at 16. Before showing them to you, however, permit your old grandfather to "ramble on" with a story.

The first time I was away from home for an extended period of time was during the summer when I was 16. I had a job as an "axeman" for a legal

land-surveying company. The axeman's job was (and as far as I know, still is) to chop his way through the woods to clear out a path for the "chainman" (the "chain" was a 300-foot measuring tape) and for the "transitman" (the "transit" was the surveying instrument used to measure angles, before the days of lasers).

And though it's not really relevant, let me add what I remember about getting that job – in part because maybe it'll tell you more about me and about my good fortune. Actually, I went to the nearby "big city" to apply for a job on a tugboat, because I thought I knew pretty-well everything there was to know about boats. I remember, embarrassingly well, that I dressed as best I could for the interviews: my best jacket was my gold and black basketball jacket (which I showed you is still in my closet), and the best tie I had was a color-coordinated black and yellow bow tie! How stupid I must have looked! Maybe that's why the tugboat people seemed to laugh at me when I applied to them for a job.

I don't remember why, during that trip, I submitted an application for the job as axeman with a surveying company. I don't think I even knew what surveying was. Maybe I saw an ad in the newspaper. If it said axeman, I probably thought: "Well, maybe I don't know everything about tugboats, but I know all there is to know about using an axe!"

[And in this story, Dear, there might be a lesson for you, namely, to try to constrain "the over-confidence of youth" – which is rampant! In particular, I still have a large scar on my leg, available to remind me of consequences of being over-confident. Thus, as I subsequently learned, it's wise to evaluate where an axe will bounce, if it glances off what you originally planned to chop – and make sure that your leg isn't there!]

Anyway, a month or so later that summer, the surveying company phoned me and asked if I still wanted the job. I sure did: at that time, I was working for a small construction company, and the work was killing me. I remember that, at the time of the phone call, my job was to get wheelbarrows full of wet concrete from the truck and wheel them about 500 feet down a steep, narrow path to a foundation for a new house. It was a huge wheelbarrow: loaded with concrete, that wheelbarrow probably weighed more than I did. I was in excellent physical shape (I played a lot of sports), but that job was too much for me.

So anyway, when the surveying company called and offered me more money for easier work (swinging an axe is a lot easier than wheeling concrete!) – as well as a chance to strike out in the world – I leapt at it. They told me where and when to report, and within a day or so I was gone: by ferry across the sound and then by train about 100 miles northeast, to a “whistle-stop” town (maybe 30 people lived there) called Seton Lake.

Someday maybe I’ll tell you other stories about that summer, but let me get on with the point of this story. My summer at Seton Lake was the one before my senior year in high school. The next fall, in one of my English classes (we had two English classes, one in composition and the other in literature), a contest was announced, with the winners to have their compositions printed in a book called something similar to: “A Collection of the Country’s Best Student Writers.” I was one of the winners, and I wish I had a copy of the book – my first time in print! – but I don’t think I ever received one. I do remember, though, how proud my mother (your great grandmother) was when we went to the bank – not to collect money (because I’m sure there were no royalties) but if I recall correctly, to sign the copyright forms in front of a “Notary Public”.

But I do have a copy of what I wrote: it was reprinted in our school’s yearbook, which I’m glad I still have. Now, to be truthful, I’m embarrassed by this writing; I’m amazed that it won anything. So, please, never mind the quality of the composition [in what follows, I’ve corrected only some obvious spelling or typing and punctuation errors]; instead, please try just to gain some insight into what this 16-year-old was thinking. It was called:

Poetry

To write good poetry you have to be an inspired genius. If you’re inspired and like me, you come up with a jumble of words of which maybe one line is good poetry. If you’re a genius and not inspired, you come up with a great bunch of words that mean something only to the poet’s mother; unfortunately, she died years earlier. And then there’s the people like me who either get inspired or get expired from their English class. This results in the worst poetry of all.

I started a sonnet once on my own; a few weeks later it became an English assignment. I had the first stanza and ideas for a punch line done on my own:

*Do you not find it hard to understand
How He made air and water on the sand,
Gave light and darkness for the land. And then,
As if it’s not enough, created man!*

*Days go by
With the flick
Of your eye;
But love should keep growing
And flowing and mowing
Down sores
That cause
The wars.*

*When my days are done
And the sorrowing sun
Sets for the last time;
In my last rhyme
I will ask you all
To love –
and please take heed;
follow God's lead! –
Your fellow mortal.*

And so, little sweetheart, maybe you see why I think that age 16 was a pretty good choice. At 16, I worried:

*The Bible explains it, scientists too;
They're different versions; which one is true?*

And I concluded:

*You live, and you die
[Though I should have written:
You're born and you die]
And you love in between.
So, if you can, try
To love everything.*

Given that I was thinking such thoughts, I think that 16 would have been a good age to hear my grandfather's opinions about life, and God, and love (if I had known my grandfather) – or even to hear my father's opinions, if I had known him!

Which then brings me to another story, this one partly about your father – a story that provides further support for my choice not to respond to a certain four-year-old's question until she reached 16. When your father was about 16, his brother (your uncle-with-the-beard) had his terrible car accident. Actually, he died twice – he stopped living twice; he's now alive thanks to

the doctors, as well as others. Which leads me to the point of this next story.

We were living in Corvallis at the time: I was teaching at the university, your grandmother was getting her engineering degree (with highest honors: *summa cum laude!*), your uncle-with-the-beard was home from the University of Washington for the winter “holidays” (but working for a building-supply company), your father was about 16 (as I already mentioned), and his sister must then have been in about grade seven.

I don’t remember much about what I was doing when I learned that your uncle had crashed his car. Most is a blur. I do remember arriving at the Emergency Room at the hospital just in time to see him being wheeled from the emergency room to the intensive care unit, with his broken leg sticking up in the air and with his face bandaged up like a mummy.

He was unconscious for days. Your grandmother and I sat in the waiting room for days and nights, worried numb. I don’t remember how we looked after your father and his sister; probably we took shifts. And now, looking back, I’m afraid we didn’t do enough to help your father and his sister through what we were all going through. What I do remember is this. It was at this time that I finally rejected God, totally.

During the 20-or-so years between my writing the above questioning poem (when I was in high school) and my feeling devastated in the hospital (wondering if our son would live), I hadn’t given “the God idea” much thought: I was too busy getting my degrees, raising my family, working, and all the rest.

What rekindled my thoughts – or better, exploded my mind – was a stupid pastor or priest (or whatever he was) who came around to that waiting room outside the intensive-care unit. Just as I had seen him do to others during the days I waited there, he came to me and asked something similar to: “Would you like to pray with me for your son?”

Angrily I said “No.” To me he seemed like a vulture, swooping down to devour the most helpless prey: everyone in that waiting room was stressed to the limit. As far as I was concerned, he was there not to help but to plunder.

Sitting there, hour after hour, of course I wondered: should I give in? Should I pray to God for my son's life? I remember well my conclusion: "No. Every rational thought I have had during my life has led me to the conclusion that the concept of God is garbage. If I give in and pray, then I'm abandoning rationality. I would be a coward to my conviction." So I stood firm.

And within about an hour of my reaching that conclusion, the doctor came out and said: "Your son has regained consciousness." And then he stupidly added: "**Thank God!**" That blew me away. Of course not only because my son would live, but because of the stupid statement "Thank God!"

What stupidity! It wasn't God who should be thanked. Thanks should go to the person who saw your uncle's car go into the irrigation ditch and immediately phoned for help, to the rescuers (one of whom jumped in the water, to hold his bleeding head out of the water, so he wouldn't drown), to the ambulance team, to the doctors and nurses, and on and on.

That is, Dear, a huge number of people deserved the thanks: those who created the "system". Thanks to Alexander Graham Bell for the telephone, to Henry Ford (and many others) for the automobile / ambulance, to all the other humans who had created everything from sirens, to good roads, to a public knowing what to do when they hear an ambulance, to the developers of all the instruments and capabilities in the hospital, to the producers of the electrical power, and so on, on and on. Which then led me, immediately, to see what should be meant by the expression "Thank God": GOD is (or should be!) an acronym for "Greatness On Demand" – with all of the greatness derived from fellow humans.

So, that's when I took my stand. Until I was 20 or so, I wondered about God. For the next 20 years or so, I was too busy to bother with the idea. Since then, I have held the firm conviction that the concept of God is garbage (except for the "Human GOD": "Human Greatness On Demand"). In fact, since then, I have been observing how horrible it has been that the concept of God was ever invented, perpetuated, and perpetrated.

But I said that this story was also to be about your father, and that's the part to which I'll now turn. While I was reaching these conclusions, your father (then about 16) came to the opposite conclusion. I'm fairly sure that I told him, at the time, about my thought that God should mean [Human] Greatness On Demand. But years later he told me that he had prayed to

God for his brother to live. Subsequently, for reasons best left for your father to tell you, he joined the Mormon church, and then still later, he met your mother. And thus you see why, even at four years old, you were indoctrinated with the God idea. And now that you're 16, I'll explain why I rejected my own indoctrination.

Dear, "actually" (a word that you've pronounced clearly and used perfectly since you were two years old!), I've had quite a bit of difficulty with this explanation. My original plan, which I worked on for many difficult months, was to go through the Bible, line-by-line, to show you what nonsense it contains. And actually, it wasn't even the stupidity of the Bible that bothered me so much as it was the truly horrible stuff it contains, not least of which being its depiction of horrible treatment of women. For example, if guns were available, Lott should have been shot for his offer to let a mob rape his daughters. Another example: the Jewish raiders having the gall to say that their god helped them murder every man, woman, and child, because these people believed in a different god. Such hideousness! And besides such "social evils" in the Bible, there's much, much more: as a philosophical treatise, the Bible is trash; as a scientific treatise, it's junk.

As an illustration of what I mean, consider this. When I was 16, I wrote: "The Bible explains it, scientists too; They're different versions, which one is true?" Well, I can now answer that question – but it's not a simple answer, because the question was poorly posed. In general, science doesn't try to show what's "true" but "only" (!) to find generalizations that in principle can be falsified (e.g., that unlike electrical charges attract) – yet for which evidence continues to suggest that they seem to be approaching "truth". And whereas it's easy to demonstrate not only that many statement in the Bible can't be falsified even in principle (e.g., that God, angels, immortal souls, etc., exist) but also that there are a huge number of philosophical and scientific errors in the Bible (e.g., absence of definitions of terms such as 'beginning', 'creation', and 'time'; absence of explanations for creations of space, time, god, etc.; the necessary existence of electromagnetic radiation before god is reported to have said "Let there be light", which is a contradiction – unless this god couldn't see the full electromagnetic spectrum, in which case he's a pretty feeble god; etc.), therefore, the Bible should be trashed as philosophical and scientific garbage. Stated differently: questions about the creation of life and the origin of the universe are scientific questions; therefore, all the clerics of the world should mind their own business – whatever that might be (besides duping people).

Anyway, months into the task of trashing the Bible, I became quite depressed. I came to the view that the Bible is so bad (morally abhorrent, logically flawed, philosophically defunct, scientifically stupid) that it wasn't worth my time to review it. In all my years reviewing papers submitted to scientific journals, I've never encountered anything anywhere near the atrociousness of the Bible. And then I remembered another story.

The genesis of this story was the trouble your father caused me and his mother, when he was about 20. I trust that you won't cause your parents similar pain. My closest brother (your great uncle) was having similar trouble with his similarly aged son, and somewhat in desperation, we decided to take a break. We chose to go for a long motorcycle ride; in fact, we chose to drive from his home to Seton Lake (which I hadn't revisited in 35 years) and then back to our boyhood home (a round trip of about 1,000 miles) – quite a trip for two old fogeys on motorcycles!

One day when we were back at our boyhood home, we drove about 30 miles farther north along the Coast. While we were there, my brother wanted to visit an old tugboat captain he knew; I don't know where he had first met him. The house of this old tugboat captain (he must have been well over 70) was exactly what you would expect of a captain's house, with the yard perfectly "ship shape", a deck overlooking the ocean, a heavy rope for a banister, polished brass, hardwood floors, and a huge collection of maps, charts, and instruments, and of course some "spyglasses" (monoculars?) and binoculars.

I enjoyed listening to my brother and that old captain talk. I don't know how the conversation drifted to God, the Bible, and preachers, but I do remember one line from that old captain; it burned onto my brain like a tattoo. Someone was talking about preachers. The old captain's description of them: "They're like parrots, on a dead branch of knowledge, endlessly repeating the same old lines."¹

¹ I recall that, when I expressed amazement at the wisdom of his remark, the old captain said that it should be attributed to someone else. Subsequently, I found that maybe Robert Ingersoll (1833–1899) should be credited. In his book *Some Mistakes of Moses* he wrote: "I want it so that every minister will be not a parrot, not an owl sitting upon a dead limb of the tree of knowledge and hooting the hoots that have been hooted for eighteen hundred years. But I want it so that each one can be an investigator, a thinker; and I want to make his congregation grand enough so that they will not only allow him to think, but will demand that he shall think, and give to them the honest truth of his thought." Recently, Emmett F. Fields rephrased Ingersoll's statement as: "The Theologian is an owl, sitting on an old dead branch in the tree of human knowledge, and hooting the same old hoots that have been hooted for hundreds and thousands of years, but he has never given a hoot for progress."

While trying to structure this “explanation” for you, upon remembering that old tugboat captain’s line, I became even more concerned that I would need to develop a different structure. I seriously doubted if I had the stomach to dig through anymore of the Bible’s trash. Besides, as you can find (e.g., on the internet), many others have shown that the Bible (and similarly, the Book of Mormon and the “holy book” of Islam, the Quran or Koran) belong in the same trashcan of human mistakes. Consequently, I abandoned my plan to focus on the Bible – rejecting all the negativity that it generated – and instead, to respond to your question about why I don’t believe in god, I plan to try to be positive. That is, instead of emphasizing what I’ve rejected as silly – and worse – (namely, all ideas about all gods), I plan to emphasize what I have embraced (namely, life and the scientific method, or in a nutshell, “scientific humanism”).

What I want to do, then, is show you what I’ve learned about life. I review this when I’m walking in the desert, in my mind going through ideas organized with the letters of the alphabet, from A through Z. I hope that some of these ideas will be useful also for you. Thereby, as you go through life, maybe you can not only avoid chopping your own leg, smashing your own face, and damaging your own mind, but also, maybe you’ll be able to see how “to love everything”.

Grampa

PS: This truly is a “postscript”: written almost two years later!

After your Gramma learned my plans, she suggested that I try to publish this “little file”. Maybe it will help some other 16-year olds break free. In any event, to try to protect your privacy (and ours, and other people mentioned), I’ve removed the many appearances of your name, replacing it with “granddaughter” (or similar).

More love from Grampa (and Gramma)

P²S: And I’ve added this postscript, still another two years later!

Upon seeing how long this book has become, I thought I should add a suggestion, namely, I recommend that you don’t try to rush through reading this book. A chapter per week would be enough – or more than enough?! Maybe you could set aside a few hours per week from your busy schedule (maybe every Saturday morning, while “the kids” are watching cartoons) to learn what your old grandfather spent so many years writing to you. That way, it will take you roughly a year to read this book – and if you’ll

also read the “appendices” and do the “reading assignments” (which you’ll find in some chapters), then it will take you two-or-more years to finish this book, which is plenty fast enough. There’s no rush, no deadline, no examinations!

Grampa, again.

P³S: This is getting ridiculous. I’ve added this roughly ten years later!

Although I had subsequently decided to delay sending you this book until after your sixteenth birthday (with the thought that, whereas the ideas it contains could cause confrontations in your family, I should delay conveying them to you until you had graduated from high school and were about to set out on your own), yet for reasons that have unfortunately become clear to you, I’ve decided to send the book to you now, chapter by chapter, just as you’ve turned 16 – as I had originally promised.

Guess who.