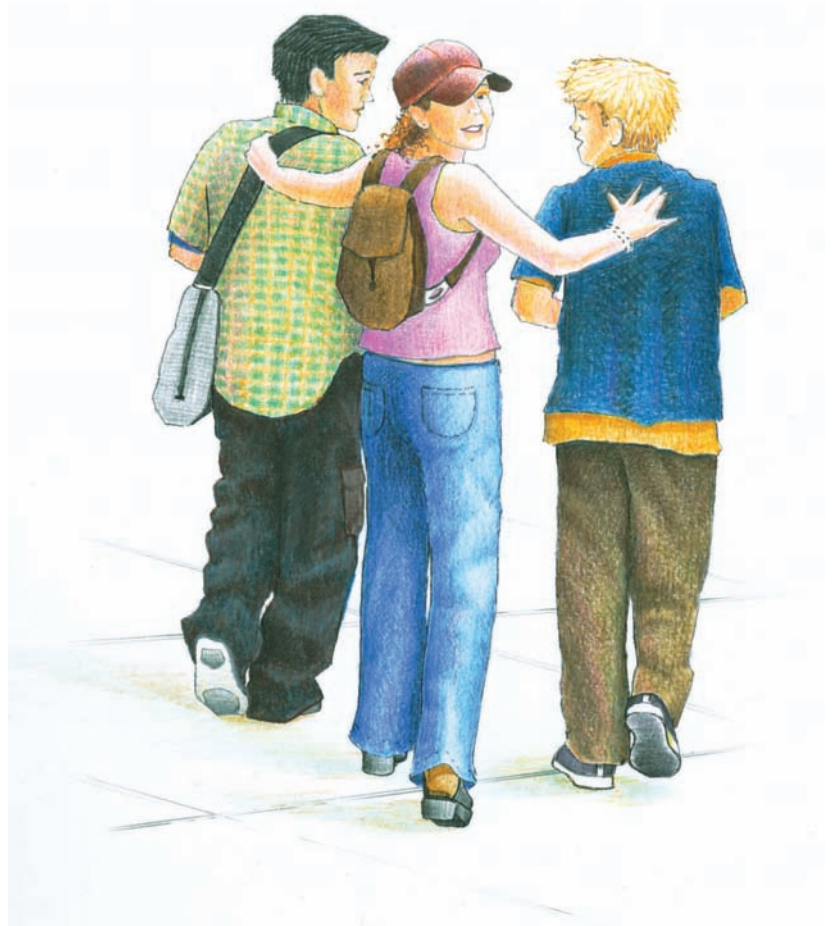


One Last Thing Before You Go

By Charlotte Johnstone



When Geneva Rademacher, director of religious education, sent invitations for Forbearance’s annual brunch for graduating high school and college seniors, she included a separate note for their parents and grandparents.

“Your young people are about to start a new adventure that will challenge them in new ways. You have guided, cajoled, reprimanded, praised and loved them through their years at home. Now comes the ‘letting go,’ when your prayers and Forbearance’s prayers go with them. If there were one last thing you could tell them—one piece of advice, serious or not-so-serious—what would it be? Think about it, write it down and send it to me. Your thoughts will be cobbled into a homegrown ‘commencement speech’—Forbearance style.”

Apparently, Geneva’s request struck a chord, because it wasn’t long before she began to receive scribbled notes—a motley collection of messages from families ranging from those who were dreading an empty nest to those who could hardly wait to turn their graduate’s bedroom into a home office.

And so it came to pass that after the meal that day, after the picture-taking and the sometimes raucous conversation of young people eager to move on, Geneva rose to deliver some “last words” from a church family with mixed emotions.



“Ladies and gentlemen, no longer boys and girls, graduates of the class of 2003:

As you leave this place, what can we say to you that will guide you in the years ahead? Or, more accurately, what can we tell you now that you would already know if you had listened to us when we told you in the first place? Remember all the things we told you when you were growing up? Probably not, right? Well, while no one has a lock on wisdom, here are a few thoughts from your families and from your church to take with you on your journey.

First of all, ignore advice to get in touch with your ‘inner child.’ You already did that. If your inner child urges you to do something that you wouldn’t want in a headline, press ‘delete.’ Now is the time to get in touch with your inner adult. The world needs grownups—men and women who can think straight, speak clearly, share well with others, deliver the goods, rise to the occasion, create beauty, clean up their messes, bathe regularly, take popularity and fads with a grain of salt, balance a checkbook and aspire to something larger and grander

than their own comfort.

Choose to be happy. Make your own brand of joy. Do not wait for someone or some event or some status to make you happy. Rejoice now in the adventure of life. Be grateful to God that you can.

Show up on time. 'Later, dude' is a phrase not favored by grownups.

Risk yourself. Be open to new friends, new ideas, new challenges. Get to know people of whom you may be wary. Seek other opinions. Learn another's language. Don't hug your ego and self-image so tight that you miss opportunities to learn about the world from other perspectives.

Floss.

Separate the darks from the lights when you do the wash.

Pursue a career that you love. You will retire someday and that will have been a long time to be unhappy.

Used pizza boxes should not be stored under beds. Mold is not a good thing.

Fight fair. Meanness and insults betray a lack of imagination and will leave you feeling small. And idle gossip tells others you can't be trusted with a secret.

Be kind to your parents and siblings. They're the ones who will let you in at 3 A.M. and they're the ones who will accept collect calls.

Make the least of all that goes and the most of all that comes. Rethink and adjust. Cut short the regrets and move on.

Buy at least one suit. You're going to need one sooner or later, because naked navels and low-rider pants may not take you where you want to go.

Be savvy about when to stop—when to leave the party; when to step out of the way; when to be quiet; when to go home and get some sleep; when to say, 'I've done the best I can'; when to heed the horse sense of another generation—'I'm just going to leave it lay where Jesus flung it.'

Practice compassion. Be kind without thought of return. Be the change you want to see in the world.

Ask interesting questions. The least likely people often know amazing things.

If you humiliate yourself, be consoled with the thought that you probably made someone else's day. Consider it an act of charity.

If at first you don't succeed, try, try again. If you still don't succeed, think about changing your major or your job. No use being a darn fool about it.

Call your parents at least once every two weeks. When it comes time to read the will, you don't want them to have forgotten your name.

Wear sunscreen. Don't play with fire. Look both ways before crossing a life-changing decision.

Think like a good actor—observe, observe, observe. If you do, you'll learn something new every day.

Trust what you learned from Mr. Rogers—that 'the real drama of life rarely takes place on center stage and rarely involves the fancy things of life. It comes from knowing that we can be trusted, that we have nothing to fear from the truth, and that the foundation of our very being is good stuff.'*

Trust what you learned from your family—you are worthy of love and you are capable of giving love.

And, finally, trust what you learned from Forbearance Church. You are a child of God. You have a home in God's house anywhere. Jesus loves you, this we know. Forbearance and her people, who have watched you grow, send you to your future, wherever it may take you, with blessings for sustained faith, integrity and conscience."



Amen and amen.

After everyone had gone, Geneva felt pretty good about what she had engineered. It was a send-off, a marking of an important rite of passage, a church family calling out the door to "remember what matters, drive carefully, mind your manners, we'll be here if you need us, God be with you."

"Yes, indeed," Geneva said to herself, "amen and amen."

*From the commencement address delivered by Fred Rogers to Marquette University, Milwaukee, Wisconsin on May 20, 2001

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