

AN OPEN LETTER TO MY CHILDREN

Hi guys,

I'm writing this in the study at home. I can hear Amelia playing table tennis outside and, a bit further away, Charlie is playing footie with some friends. Mum and Esme are on their way home from Devon and it's a quiet, happy-go-lucky kind of day. The dogs are sprawled around me in a big heap, and in a while I'll walk them around the fields and think about what we might have for dinner tonight.

It's a couple of years since I turned fifty, and a couple of months since I finished writing the last instalment of *The 50 Things*. It has been a fairly challenging process, and some of the things I thought would be hard to write about were the easiest, while others baffled me for a few weeks before I found my voice. But every chapter came about through the same process: intuition.

Sure, I made a list of fifty topics I wanted to write about, but I had no plan for the order in which I would write them, nor what I would say. Having identified the next topic I reflected on it, mainly while driving, and filed the ideas away in the back of my mind, waiting for the moment when I simply could not avoid writing for another minute. Once the gestation process was over, I would find a way to hook myself into the topic – sometimes a

definition, sometimes a quotation – and then I would launch myself into mid-air and hope for a soft landing. And once I had written the first one, I had to work out what to do with it. Was it just for you guys? If so, why not just email it? But I realised that in writing this I was declaring my hand, not just about my love for you as your father, but on every single one of the issues I wrote about, so I decided to start a blog. I have to admit I was nervous, but the responses from people who read the blog were unanimously warm and positive. Everyone seemed to recognise something in what I was trying to say, regardless of whether they were yet a parent themselves.

Because, you know how I said that turning fifty didn't really mean that much to me? Well, turns out it did. It struck me very hard that I am more than likely over halfway through my life – not that I want to be morbid – and I've been thinking about the things I have and haven't done and the things I might still do. And I worked out that if I can do anything of real value in this life, it might be to leave a trail of breadcrumbs for all of you to follow, so that if stuff comes up – and trust me, it's going to – you will have a note from me, a chance to refer back to what I thought on things that are important to me, and hopefully to you.

It's not compulsory. You don't even need to read it now. I just wanted to leave you – just in case I'm not always around to talk to – some user-friendly guidance, a kind of handbook for life, to help you cut through the jigs and the reels of the daily grind and get to where you want that little bit faster. You see, the thing that continues to drive me crazy about my own life is that, after all these years, I'm still trying to work it out. I feel as though I'm still crazy-paving my way down a yellow-brick road in pitch-darkness, while all around me others are doing the same, but

making it look so much more accomplished. Sometimes I feel as though I'm still waiting to begin, for things to get started the way I want them to, and all the while the clock is ticking relentlessly on. And at some point soon someone is going to declare that I'm just too old to be bothered with any more.

But there was another thing that inspired me, and it was this: I reminded myself that when you were all tiny, our bedtime routine invariably included a bottle of warm milk and a story, snuggled up in bed, safe and protected from the world. And sometimes, in addition to the story, we would review the day and recall all the things that had happened. As the song says, we'd minimise the negative, accentuate the positive, reinforce good life lessons and try to set you up for a night of sweet dreams. One night as I finished the story, I got up to go and Charlie, who would have been about four, said, 'Daddy, can you do the Day-It-Is?'

At first I thought you said, 'Daddy, can you do the Deities?' and I was wondering what the hell I was going to come up with for that! But, of course, the name stuck, though time moved on and you all grew up. So, in a way, this is your own grown-up version of the 'Day-It-Is', only now it's called *The 50 Things*.

Whatever the subject, I promise you one thing: I don't know anything. Furthermore, anyone who tells you he knows anything is either deluded or dishonest, and best avoided.

The truth is, as someone really smart (Socrates or Plato, I think) once said, 'The man who claims he knows, knows nothing; the man who claims nothing, knows.'

Just think about it.

I love you.

Dad x

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