
LIVING HAPPILY EVER AFTER

“ONCE UPON A TIME . . .”

When I was growing up, my bedtime ritual every night included a fairy tale that always started with the same words and always concluded with the familiar, satisfying phrase that marked the end of the story and let me know it was time to go to sleep. You remember those famous closing words, don't you? I imagine a smile has already come to your face as the words formed in your mind: “And they lived happily ever after.”

As a child of the optimistic 1950s, I dreamed that life might be something like that. No matter what obstacles, dangers, and perils might come my way, in the end I would live happily ever after.

I was a teenager in the late 1960s. I went to college and got married in the 1970s. I raised young children in the 1980s. I raised

teenagers in the 1990s. In the '90s, I also embarked on a political path that would take me to almost eleven years in the Arkansas Governor's Mansion and two runs for the White House. During the decade beginning in 2010, I really hit the jackpot with the arrival of the six cutest and most adorable grandchildren on earth. I say that humbly, objectively, and quite truthfully!

My journey so far has convinced me that while we all may start with certain expectations, life does not always lead to living happily ever after. Life can sometimes be hard—very hard.

A Not-So-Fairy-Tale Ending

Not long ago, I came across a heartbreaking article about former NFL superstar Aaron Hernandez. By every account, young Aaron's life seemed like a fairy tale that would surely have a "happily ever after" ending. An outstanding football player at Bristol Central High

School in Connecticut, Aaron set several state records and even a national high school record for receiving yards per game. He soared to national fame his senior year, when he was named Connecticut's 2007 Gatorade Football Player of the Year and ranked as the top tight-end recruit in the country.

Yet despite his exceptional football performance, Aaron began making some unwise choices off the field. Devastated by the death of his father, Aaron started

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partying and using drugs. Worse, he began hanging out with the local gangs his father had been trying to shield him from.

Thankfully, the University of Florida gave him a football scholarship and a fresh start. Aaron had a standout career at Florida, helping the Gators win the 2009 BCS National Championship and being recognized as a first-team All-American. With his stardom on the rise, he decided to forgo his senior season and enter the NFL Draft.

But several off-field incidents in Florida revealed that Aaron was making the same kinds of poor choices he had made in high school. He failed multiple drug tests and was charged with possession of marijuana. One night he got into a drunken fight with a restaurant employee after refusing to pay his bill, and a few months later, he and four other University of Florida players were questioned about a shooting.

Because of these and other issues, Aaron fell to the fourth round of the 2010 NFL Draft. He was signed by the New England Patriots, starting the 2010 season as the youngest player on any active roster in the NFL. He appeared to embrace this new start, playing three successful seasons with the Patriots and even helping lead the team to Super Bowl XLVI. Aaron was finally on his way to achieving his fairy-tale ending of fame, fortune, and Super Bowl titles.

Yet living so close to his hometown, Aaron was unable to resist going back to the gang life. Just ten months after he signed a \$40 million contract with the Patriots in 2012, Aaron was charged with the murder of a friend, Odin Lloyd. After Aaron's arrest, the Patriots released Hernandez from his contract. In 2015, Aaron Hernandez

was convicted of first-degree murder and sentenced to life in prison without the possibility of parole. He was later accused in two other cases, one for double murder and attempted murder and one for witness intimidation.

By 2017, Aaron's success story was over. His money and career were gone. His endorsement deals were cancelled, his likeness was erased from popular video games, his award-winning photo was taken out of the Pro Football Hall of Fame, and his memorabilia and merchandise were removed from the University of Florida and NFL pro shops. He had few supporters or friends. As one commentator put it, "He was no longer Aaron Hernandez the Super Bowl tight end, the star of Boston's nightclubs or even the celebrity defendant. He was just a 27-year-old convicted killer doomed to live his life in a prison cell."¹

In the early morning hours of April 19, 2017, on the same day his Patriots teammates were scheduled to celebrate another Super Bowl victory at the White House, Aaron Hernandez's body was discovered tied with a bedsheet to his prison cell in Shirley, Massachusetts. His death was ruled a suicide.

Aaron Hernandez's life is a stark reminder that some life stories, no matter how promising, just don't end "happily ever after." At such times, it becomes more important than ever to begin assessing the difference between the immediate and the ultimate. What we do and how we live really do matter.

When we act on our passions of the moment and succumb to the feelings of "right now" without regard for the impact these actions will have, we have committed a grievous sin—letting our *lifestyle* ruin our *lifetime*.

Life Is Not a Dress Rehearsal

I once was visiting in an office and noticed a sign that proclaimed, “Enjoy life. This is not a dress rehearsal.” That simple message stuck with me and still does.

How painfully true that is. Life is not a dress rehearsal. This is the real thing. We make choices that have consequences for a lifetime.

This book seeks to challenge our culture’s perspective of “If it feels good, do it.” For decades, our nation has been focused on personal pleasure. Baby boomers were known as the “Me” generation. Today’s generation has been dubbed “iGen,” with young people so fixated on self and selfies that even our gadgets start with *I*. Modern advertising bombards us with the message that life is all about me; it is all about now.

Such messages may sell products and services, but they will cause us to sell our souls if we follow this philosophy to its logical conclusion.

At some point in life, we will all experience events that shake up our everyday routine, much like the agitator in the washing machine shakes loose the grime in our clothes. Such experiences are neither desired nor enjoyed. But they are necessary to force us to focus on the frailty of life and the certainty of death. They also force us to begin asking what really matters and why.

It is a safe bet that one hundred years from today, most of us will have passed from this life. We have no way of knowing if we

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have already celebrated our last birthday or observed our final Christmas. We will be challenged from time to time to ask whether in the final analysis our lives really mattered and, if so, in what way and for whom. If we live and then die, and that is all there is, then it may not matter a great deal what we do or how well we do it. But if we believe there is even a remote possibility that our actions have lasting implications beyond our lifetime, this should cause us to think differently, live differently, and leave a different kind of legacy.

Living Beyond Your Lifetime

Without apology, I believe the spiritual side of our lives really does matter. To believe otherwise is, in essence, to define humans as little more than animated protoplasm hopelessly going about our routines for no particular purpose. I prefer to believe that, as spiritual beings, there is more to us than flesh and blood. If we do possess a soul capable of living beyond our lifetimes, then the seeds we plant in this life will yield fruit forever. If you believe those things, the ultimate becomes more important than the immediate.

When we decide to live beyond our lifetime, our responsibilities to the next generation will outweigh our roles in our current jobs. More important than the money we are paid for our work is what we will become as a result of our work. Our character will become more critical than the careers we follow.

For all of us, life began “once upon a time.” Unlike the fairy tales, however, it is up to you to make the choices that determine whether the last line of your life story will read, “And they lived happily ever after.”

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What experiences have you had that made you realize life is not always like a fairy tale—that not everyone ends up living “happily ever after”?
2. What evidence do you see that our culture promotes the idea, “If it feels good, do it”?
3. In your opinion, what are some of the characteristics of a life that really matters? What are some of the characteristics of a life that counts for nothing?
4. What do you think the author means by this statement: “As spiritual beings, there is more to us than flesh and blood”?
5. Do you believe that what we do and how we live really matters? Why or why not?

POTATO SALAD TIME

I HAD NEVER FELT SO ALONE IN MY LIFE.

I stood in a well-kept cemetery just off highway US 67 in Hope, Arkansas. I stared at the cold stone marker on which the names of my parents were etched, along with the dates of their births and the dates of their deaths.

It was rare for me to be alone. I had asked the governor's security detail from the Arkansas State Police to give me some space. My mother had died on the last day of September 1999. For the first time since I showed up on this planet, my only family links, other than my sister and my wife, were my descendants. When my mother drew her last breath, I became the oldest living link my children had in their bloodlines on my side of the family.

The depth of my grief was not so much over the circumstances of my mother's death. Since a brain aneurysm and series of strokes

in early 1992, her health had declined steadily. In her last days, it was no longer merciful to pray for continued existence as she was experiencing it. I was comforted by my unwavering faith that there was in fact a God in whose arms she would fall. I knew death was not the worst thing that could happen to her. Continuing in her state would, in fact, have been worse.

It wasn't so much that she had died as it was the fact that her death had closed the book on an entire generation. Her passing had taken away my last link to the past and forever physically separated me from the one in whose womb I was formed.

It would have been easier if I could have wept bitterly. God has a wonderful way of washing away our grief with a cleansing shower of tears. But some pain is far too intense to be expressed with the same emotions we once used for a scraped knee, a sad movie, or a loss in a championship basketball game. In that moment, I understood better Romans 8:26: "The Spirit also helps in our weaknesses. For we do not know what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered" (NKJV). The phrase "groanings which cannot be uttered" became more meaningful as I sought in the depth of my soul to find a vehicle of expression for my grief.

None of us gets to choose how we come into this world. We can't choose our parents, our hometown, or the physician who ushers us into this life. Unless we end our lives by our own hands, neither do we choose the circumstances or date of our deaths.

Even though we don't choose how we start life or how we end it, we most certainly choose how we live. It is how we live that may determine how people feel as they stand staring at our names chiseled

into the gravestones. It is how we live that will affect generations to come and countless people whose names we don't even know.

In the South, there's a time-honored tradition that friends of the deceased bring more food to the grieving family than can ever be eaten. Obesity among Southerners may in fact be tied to the number of funerals we are part of. After a loved one dies, there will soon be a parade of people, a pastor's visit, lots of hugs, and, without fail, large bowls of potato salad. The potato salad is such a Southern fixture during the period of grief that some refer to it as "potato salad time."

"Potato salad time" is a good time to do some serious reflection about what really matters. No matter how busy we are, it's often in the presence of the potato salad that we are brought to a halt and reminded of how temporary this life is. Consuming large quantities of potato salad may not be good for your health, but being consumed by overwhelming doses of reality can be helpful.

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The Value of a Life That Matters

You don't have to leave behind millions of dollars to have lived a life that mattered. The size of your tombstone doesn't indicate the size of your life. I sometimes take casual walks through cemeteries and read the tombstones. You can learn a lot by reading information on tombstones about those whose voices are stilled but whose legacies live on. Most of their names never made the headlines. More died poor than rich in terms of money accumulated. But many of

the poorest in terms of material possessions died the richest because of the lives they lived and the legacies they passed on.

The real legacy of life cannot be calculated by an army of accountants. The value of one's life is seen in the character of those whose lives were touched, whether children, extended family members, or even strangers who benefited in some way from a person's influence.

The theme of the popular Christmas movie *It's a Wonderful Life* comes to mind at "potato salad time." Years ago, as I navigated through midlife, I was more acutely aware than ever that I am on a collision course with the moment when that bowl of potato salad will be in memory of *me*. Now, in what is undoubtedly the final third of my time on this earth, I have several friends who have died, and if they were around my age, it always seemed like it was way too soon.

I didn't grow up with wealth, but it was perhaps the lack of money that kept me from always wanting more. I had the basics: food, shelter, clothing. Most of all, I had a family, loyal friends, a community, and a church. I realized I had all I really needed and more than I really deserved. As I continue the pilgrimage toward "potato salad time," I want to make sure I leave something behind that has far more value than money or property.

My goal throughout my life was never to leave behind a great deal of wealth, and for most of my adult life I succeeded wonderfully!

It wasn't until I was well into my fifties that I started making some pretty decent money. Prior to that, my entire adult life was mostly spent in nonprofit work or in politics. I earned enough to eke out a living, but I had little saved or put aside—and running

for public office pretty much emptied my retirement account, life insurance, and savings. After two runs for president, I've made it clear to people that I'm done running for office. I can only raid the retirement fund so many times before it becomes just plain reckless and irresponsible. When rumors persisted that I was going to get back into a campaign, and news reports kept surfacing that it was true, I finally put a stop to the rumors in March 2017 when I announced at the Republican Party of Okaloosa County, Florida, dinner that there was a greater likelihood I would have transgender surgery than run for political office again. That ended the rumors!

The lack of material wealth for most of my life has been a blessing in many ways. Because it has not been my goal to own things, it has not been my life's curse to be owned by them. I can honestly say that I was no happier living in the Governor's Mansion in Little Rock than I was when Janet and I occupied the north end of a forty-dollars-a-month duplex in Arkadelphia, Arkansas, as newlyweds. (At forty dollars a month, it was greatly overpriced!)

In the years since I started working for Fox News, hosting a new weekend show taped in Nashville on TBN (Trinity Broadcasting Network), being on the speaking circuit, writing best-selling books, and having some successes in business enterprises, I have been able to enjoy material things that I never dreamed of as a child

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or even a young adult. But Janet and I have realized that having more is really the opportunity to give more, and we have delighted in giving more to our church than we used to dream of earning, or simply being able to leave a tip for a server that was more than the meal cost just to be a blessing to someone who was working hard and probably needed an unexpected boost for that day. We have discovered that the value of a life done well cannot be measured in bank accounts or stock portfolios. One of the simple joys of a life done well is giving generously and freely to others.

The Legacy of a Life That Matters

I remember vividly the first time I stood at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at Arlington National Cemetery in Virginia. The soldier known only to God left not so much as his name, yet he is honored twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. He represents

the high cost of our American freedom. It's inconceivable to me that any American could stand at that place and not feel a sense of gratitude and pride.

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I also have visited the great pyramids of Egypt twice and marveled at the elaborate tombs of the ancient Egyptian pharaohs. While I was impressed with the

architecture and innovation of the magnificent pyramids, I was struck with the thought that so much effort was made for the dead. You can't help but wonder if the effort might have been more productive had it been made for the living.

I've also visited the cemetery near Mount Zion in Jerusalem and stood at the grave of Oskar Schindler, who was immortalized in Steven Spielberg's Oscar-winning film *Schindler's List*. Oskar Schindler failed at marriage and at business. But he left a legacy because, when he had the opportunity, he acted to save the lives of others. Entire generations of Jewish families owe their existence to his courage and sacrifice.

Perhaps the most vivid memories come from my many trips to Jerusalem and the two places vying for designation as the likely burial spot of Jesus Christ. The one thing the tombs have in common is that they are both empty. The thousands of visitors who flock to these sites each day to see that "He has risen! He is not here" (Mark 16:6) remind us of the most important legacy of all. That's the fact that this life, though important, is not the only one we live for. When our time on this earth is over, we will, by faith, share the legacy of our Lord as we enter into eternal life in heaven with him.

The choices we make in this life really matter. The seeds we plant during our lives will bear fruit through those who live beyond us and our "potato salad time."

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What's the difference between owning things and being owned by things?
2. What kind of legacy have people like Oskar Schindler left the world?
3. What legacy have your parents left you?
4. What type of legacy are you working to leave for others?
5. Which do you think is more important: a material legacy or a spiritual legacy? Why?

THE CULTURE OF THE MOMENT

DICK MORRIS SAT ON THE EDGE OF THE BED in the small, crowded room on the sixth floor of the Camelot Hotel in downtown Little Rock. It was 8:30 p.m. on July 29, 1993, and the polls had been closed for less than an hour after a special election for the office of lieutenant governor. This was the only item on the ballot in Arkansas that day.

Ordinarily, an election for lieutenant governor would draw little media attention. But this race was different. The office was vacant because Arkansas's former governor, Bill Clinton, had been sworn in as president, and the lieutenant governor, Jim Guy Tucker, had moved up to governor.

The vacancy for lieutenant governor was in the political spotlight during the summer of 1993. The race had become much more

than a contest for the office itself. It was the first major election in Arkansas following Clinton's move to the White House. Up to that point in 1993, Republicans had put together a clean sweep of major elections across America. Later that year, governor's races in New Jersey and Virginia would be claimed by the GOP.

On this hot and humid day, political eyes nationwide were focused on Arkansas to see what would happen in the new president's backyard. Morris was no stranger to Arkansas political races or to conducting political polls to determine how those races were going. He had worked for Clinton in every one of the president's political races except his unsuccessful 1974 race for Congress and his unsuccessful 1980 race for governor.

Only a handful of results came in during the first hour after the polls closed at 7:30 p.m. As each new total was posted, Morris would scratch furiously on a yellow legal pad and then enter the figures in a pocket calculator. Just past 8:30 p.m., with fewer than 15 percent of the precincts having reported, Morris turned to me and, in a matter-of-fact tone of voice, said, "Congratulations, you're going to be elected lieutenant governor with 51 percent of the vote."

It would be another ninety minutes before the rest of the ballots were counted and the results were clear enough for my opponent to concede and for me to walk on the stage and face a cheering crowd of supporters. I declared victory with 51 percent of the vote. How could he possibly have known the outcome so early with so little information?

That night, I recognized the power of scientific polling to recognize trends, attitudes, and movements of public opinion. In today's politics, having a competent pollster can be expensive, but

not nearly as expensive as not having the information the pollster can generate. Good information ensures that the right campaign decisions are made. One of the valuable lessons I learned that night was that if you only have a small budget, spend enough of it to get accurate research. Spending what little money you have on a message that hasn't been carefully tested is not called "saving money"; it's called "losing the election."

During subsequent campaigns, I came to appreciate even more the value of public opinion research. Polling is much like using a thermometer. A thermometer can give an accurate measurement of what the temperature is at a given moment. What a thermometer cannot do, however, is adjust the temperature and make it what it should be. Similarly, polling can tell you where things are at a given moment, but it cannot make any needed changes.

It is important for a political candidate to know what the public believes. But for a candidate to express a belief only because it reflects current public sentiment is not what a republican form of government is about. Our culture needs people whose lives are built upon clear, carefully considered principles. Too many of our leaders today are making decisions based only on what people claim to want rather than what is truly right or wrong.

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Principles Worth Living By

As a teenager in my hometown of Hope, Arkansas, I often heard my pastor say, "If you don't stand for something, you will fall for

anything.” Corporate leaders, political leaders, church leaders, and families are at their best when they are motivated by principles rather than public opinion.

What are some principles worth living by? Ask a roomful of people, and you could get a roomful of answers. But there already exists a code of principles established thousands of years ago and adhered to by millions of people from a variety of religious backgrounds. It has been widely accepted as a basis for appropriate behavior. Fortunately, no one has copyrighted the Ten Commandments.

Although an increasing number of attempts have been made to prohibit these principles from being displayed in recent years, they have survived through the ages. They are the foundation for most of our laws and commonly accepted codes of human behavior.

Law always reveals the character of the people who created it. Therefore, God’s law reveals the character of a God who delivered it. In the Ten Commandments, law is the imperative of love. The essence of the Ten Commandments is to depict what love looks like.

The Ten Commandments are divided into two sections—the vertical laws deal with people’s relationship with God, and the horizontal laws deal with people’s relationship with others. Jesus would say the entire law could be summed up in two basic principles: to love God with all your heart and to love your neighbor as yourself (Luke 10:27). This essentially captures our responsibility to God and others.

Some people have attempted to portray the “thou shalt not’s” of the Ten Commandments as negative. Understood in the proper context, however, these commandments are positive affirmations of life-giving principles of a life done well.

Here is a look at the ten basic laws that appear in Exodus 20:1–17:

1. *You shall have no other gods before me.* This is an affirmation that God can create a relationship with us that is strong enough to dismiss the need for further searching.
2. *You shall not make for yourself an [idol].* The Creator God cannot be limited or confined to a tangible object that can be sold, lost, or destroyed. God is a person who cannot be contained in a physical trinket. We need to be glad he can't!
3. *You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God.* This principle of “not using the Lord’s name in vain” affirms that God’s name should not be used carelessly. We must not treat God’s love with contempt.
4. *Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy.* True love sets apart special time for those who are loved. The principle behind a day of rest was not to have a day to forget God but a day to remember him.
5. *Honor your father and your mother.* Real love respects authority. We must learn to honor authority first in the home. If we don’t learn respect in our families, then we likely will never learn it at all.
6. *You shall not murder.* This commandment affirms the sacredness of human life. It reminds us that the goal of love is always to heal, not to hurt.
7. *You shall not commit adultery.* Adultery defrauds the love of another and destroys the self-esteem of the one

being defrauded. Promises and vows are sacred, and this commandment affirms the validity and authority of such promises.

8. *You shall not steal.* True love has the desire to give instead of take.
9. *You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.* Gossip and falsehoods defy the character of God, who is always honest. Some seek to justify spreading rumors in the name of concern or even correction. But even when we speak well of others, we must remember that real love is always honest.
10. *You shall not covet.* Love delights in the possessions of others rather than desiring what others have.

The Ten Commandments reveal God's depth of character and our lack of character. These laws are a mirror not only reflecting what is but also projecting what ought to be, giving us the standard against which to compare our lives.

A person who has no standard to live by other than the culture of the moment is a person whose principles might as well come from the latest public opinion polls.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. Why does our culture need people whose lives are built upon clear, carefully considered principles?
2. What did you learn in the Ten Commandments about the character of God?
3. Which of the Ten Commandments are most important—those that deal with our relationship to God or those that deal with our relationship to others?
4. Why is the commandment to “honor your father and your mother” so vitally important?
5. Can you recall a specific instance when a government official made a decision based on principle rather than public opinion?