

2007 Essay - What Does Notre Dame Football and Old Friends Have to Do With It?

Bear with me, this introduction is going to ramble a little bit about Lou Holtz and Notre Dame football.

In the late 1980s, while my kids were just starting grade school, a dear work friend (Gene Zappitelli) brought a video of Lou Holtz giving an inspirational speech at a business seminar and showed it to the staff of the plant manager. As a strong Catholic, and ex-college football player, Gene was an avid Notre Dame fan and at the time, Lou Holtz was the closest thing to God on earth: coach at Notre Dame. Holtz made money on the side by giving speeches explaining how he overcame speech defects and a fear of public speaking to become the coach at Notre Dame and how he applied basic principles to his personal and professional life. At this time, I had just finished becoming a fan of “The Seven Habits of Effective People” and my take-away from listening to the video was: explain your principles to the kids you coach and make the team live by those principles. Geeze, if this worked for teams, wouldn’t it work for my own kids and family?

Later, like the Catholic community, I found out that Holtz was not as god-like that we thought he was. His fall for me came when, after his team started a fight while entering a stadium before a game, he made a statement on ESPN that, “I told my team that if they ever did that again, I would resign”. At the time I thought, “That’s stupid. He should tell them that, if they ever did that again, they would quit, not him.”

Of course, for most of the Catholic community, Holt’s fall happened when he got fired from Notre Dame.

I actually applied what I had heard in that Lou Holtz video! I spent a lot of time developing and then teaching my kids “Three Principles for Success”. I drilled them and drilled them, and they can still repeat these principles. Below is an essay I recently wrote for my kids updating the principles.

Principles for Success

Remember when I used to drill you in my “Three Principles for Success”? Well, I want to revisit them and add a fourth.

Your entire childhood with Jeanne and I as your parents was spent being taught. Everything Jeanne and I did taught you, whether our lesson was planned, or whether it was just us trying to get by as parents. Every time we raised our voices in anger, we taught you. Every time we held you close, and told you how important you were, we taught you. I did not recognize it as we were raising you, but, parenting is really about teaching your kids by the way you, as the adult, act and behave.

We weren’t very good at it, but, I think the results were spectacular. You know Jeanne and me; we are always ready to tell you what you should do. But honestly, I would not have any of you change the way you are. You are products of us, and I am proud beyond belief about the way you turned out.

I still think I can teach you. If I was to apologize for how I raised you, and offer the one change I would make, it would be: “Don’t sweat the small stuff, and stick to your principles.”

That entire statement is a candidate for future discussion. Right now, I want to get back to the “Principles for Success.”

Here is my updated version.

1. Try Your Hardest

Satisfy yourself with your honest and true efforts. There is truth in the saying, “If it’s worth doing, its worth doing it right.” Ultimately, trying your hardest is a truly acceptable, honorable, self-serving act. It’s all about self-discipline and dedication. Only you can judge your efforts and deem them sufficient. Only you can take satisfaction from your efforts.

It is a human condition that people need to try their hardest. If you have any doubt, check out what Solomon says in Ecclesiastes (where satisfaction from hard work is a basic theme) and Proverbs. “A man can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in his work”. “So I saw that there is nothing better for a man than to enjoy his work, because that is his lot.” “He who ignores discipline despises himself”.

It’s a fact; hard effort will provide results. Beware, and do not let success due to hard effort become a false faith. You must understand that hard effort will not always allow you to reach your goal (although it puts the odds in your favor and will provide results most of the time). There will be times when you try your hardest and still fail. But, there is profit in that hard work that failed. There is profit in the failure. How more self satisfying (and obviously self serving) than saying to yourself, “I may have failed, but, I know I tried my hardest.”

2. Treat Others With Respect

A prerequisite to treating others with respect is respecting yourself. This requires a healthy level of self-confidence. Not only does treating others with respect make sense as a strategy for successful interpersonal relationships, it subliminally communicates to others that you respect yourself and expect respect from others.

Christ’s basic message to us was about love and respect: “This is my first commandment; Love each other”. I propose that, even in a secular world, this message is applicable. Paraphrasing: respect is patient, kind, does not envy, does not boast, and does not communicate self-pride. Respect is not rude, self-seeking, keeping your anger, and is slow to judge. It protects the other.

Life will present you with individuals you can not respect. In this case, do not treat them with disrespect. Ignore them, manage your interface with them, but do not treat them with disrespect. An applicable axiom we all heard from childhood is: “If you can’t say something nice, say nothing at all”

3. Make Your Own Decisions and Live by Them

Independent thought and decision making is a characteristic of maturity and self confidence. It is a stereotypical American trait that is severely challenged by the most basic of human conditions: the need to be approved and accepted. Some of our worse behavior occurs because of “group think”. When an individual wants approval from the group they will accept the group norms and decisions over their own. This desire to be approved by others is a basic human condition. Unfortunately, it causes people to accept

norms, behaviors, and actions that they would normally not find acceptable. Think: the holocaust; the inquisition; the crusades; Jim Jones; and even more mundane actions like a local club not allowing membership based on race, gender, or religion.

The best way to make your own decisions is to determine the principles you believe in. Through introspection, you need to have a clear understanding of what you think is right and wrong. Then stick to those principles when you make your decisions.

Proverbs talks about this when it states:

“My children, do not go along with them, do not set foot on their path”.

“Then you will understand what is right and just and fair – every good path. For wisdom will enter your heart, and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul. Discretion will protect you and understanding will guard you....”

You will make decisions with repercussions you did not expect or want. The mark of a mature individual is to hold themselves responsible for their decisions and actions. The mark of an immature individual, rife with a lack of self confidence, is one who blames others for their problems. Own your own mistakes confident in the knowledge that God will forgive them even if you can not.

4. Find God

When I taught you the first three principles, I missed the most important: Find God. I firmly believe God was guiding me when I taught you these principles. Why? Because they are consistent with his word.

“Try your hardest” is easiest when your boldness is based on faith.

“Treat others with respect” is the most important message from Christ: love others.

“Make your own decisions and live by them” is a basic theme of God’s relationship with man: free choice.

I failed to be an example of faith to you as you were growing up. I made a decision to not believe in God and to influence your faith positively towards Christ as you were growing up. I certainly lacked wisdom. It is a decision I made for which I am ashamed. For this failure, I beg your forgiveness, and pledge to change my ways.

On Old Friends (Added Here Only Because I Mentioned an Old Friend in the Introduction)

“Old Friends” means they use to be really close friend who you interfaced with a lot, but, because of circumstances you just don’t talk to them or see them very often. Usually with the Paschall’s, the circumstances are related to Fred being a migrant chemical worker and seemingly never staying in one town for very long.

One of our old friends is Kathy Onda, a neighbor from St Albans whose daughter, Nikki, grew up with our daughter, Katie. In her Christmas card to us this year, Kathy wrote about old friends: *“You think you will stay in touch forever and then life gets in the way”*.

As I went back to open up her card to make sure I got the quote right, I broke into a smile because I smelled smoke (instead of perfume) on the card. Either Kathy has started smoking again, or some other smoker has been in her house. So I can describe old friends as people you know so well that, when you smell smoke on their Christmas card, you wonder if they have back slid into smoking again.

Kathy Onda watched our kids grow up. She would have raised our kids or dogs if we had asked her to. We worried about Thom as he was in Iraq for two years (driving a truck for KBR). We worried about Nikki (which is ridiculous because Nikki is so smart and outgoing she can accomplish anything). So, I can describe old friends as people you still worry about and are concerned about.

Gene and Joan Zappitteli (I talked about him at the beginning of this essay) classify as old friends. I am lucky to talk to Gene once a year. If I need any advice on anything, I know I can call him up and get his considered, wise, and practical input that I can take to the bank. So, I can describe old friends as people you still trust.

In both the Onda and Zappittelli example, we know who they are, what they stand for, how they will act, we trust them, and we know they will help us if we ask. So, that pretty much describes old friends.