

perceive you as being so arrogant, because it's going to limit what you're going to be able to accomplish in life."

Looking back, his wording was so perfect. He was actually saying, "Randy, you're being a jerk." But he said it in a way that made me open to his criticisms, to listening to my hero telling me something I needed to hear. There is an old expression, "a Dutch uncle," which refers to a person who gives you honest feedback. Few people bother doing that nowadays, so the expression has started to feel outdated, even obscure. (And the best part is that Andy really *is* Dutch.)

Ever since my last lecture began spreading on the Internet, more than a few friends have been ribbing me about it, calling me "St. Randy." It's their way of reminding me that there were times I've been described in other, more colorful, ways.

But I like to think that my flaws are in the social, rather than in the moral category. And I've been lucky enough to benefit over the years from people like Andy, who have cared enough to tell me the tough-love things that I needed to hear.

Pouring Soda in the Backseat

FOR A long time, a big part of my identity was "bachelor uncle." In my twenties and thirties I had no kids, and my sister's two children, Chris and Laura, became the objects of my affection. I reveled in being Uncle Randy, the guy who showed up in their lives every month or so to help them look at their world from strange new angles.

It wasn't that I spoiled them. I just tried to impart my perspective on life. Sometimes that drove my sister crazy.

Once, about a dozen years ago, when Chris was seven years old and Laura was nine, I picked them up in my brand-new Volkswagen Cabrio convertible. "Be careful in Uncle Randy's new car," my sister told them. "Wipe your feet before you get in it. Don't mess anything up. Don't get it dirty."

I listened to her, and thought, as only a bachelor uncle can: "That's just the sort of admonition that sets kids up for failure. Of course they'd eventually get my car dirty. Kids can't help it." So I made things easy. While my sister was outlining the rules, I slowly and deliberately opened a

can of soda, turned it over, and poured it on the cloth seats in the back of the convertible. My message: People are more important than things. A car, even a pristine gem like my new convertible, was just a thing.

As I poured out that Coke, I watched Chris and Laura, mouths open, eyes widening. Here was crazy Uncle Randy completely rejecting adult rules.

I ended up being so glad I'd spilled that soda. Because later in the weekend, little Chris got the flu and threw up all over the backseat. He didn't feel guilty. He was relieved; he had already watched *me* christen the car. He knew it would be OK.

Whenever the kids were with me, we had just two rules:

- 1) No whining.
- 2) Whatever we do together, don't tell Mom.

Not telling Mom made everything we did into a pirate adventure. Even the mundane could feel magical.

On most weekends, Chris and Laura would hang out at my apartment and I'd take them to Chuck E. Cheese, or we'd head out for a hike or visit a museum. On special weekends, we'd stay in a hotel with a pool.

The three of us liked making pancakes together. My father had always asked: "Why do pancakes need to be round?" I'd ask the same question. And so we were always making weirdly shaped animal pancakes. There's a sloppiness to that

medium that I like, because every animal pancake you make is an unintentional Rorschach test. Chris and Laura would say, "This isn't the shape of the animal I wanted." But that allowed us to look at the pancake as it was, and imagine what animal it might be.

I've watched Laura and Chris grow into terrific young adults. She's now twenty-one and he's nineteen. These days, I am more grateful than ever that I was a part of their childhoods, because I've come to realize something. It's unlikely that I will ever get to be a father to children over age six. So my time with Chris and Laura has become even more precious. They gave me the gift of being a presence in their lives through their pre-teen and teen years, and into adulthood.

Recently, I asked both Chris and Laura to do me a favor. After I die, I want them to take my kids for weekends here and there, and just do stuff. Anything fun they can think of. They don't have to do the exact things we did together. They can let my kids take the lead. Dylan likes dinosaurs. Maybe Chris and Laura can take him to a natural history museum. Logan likes sports: maybe they can take him to see the Steelers. And Chloe loves to dance. They'll figure something out.

I also want my niece and nephew to tell my kids a few things. First, they can say simply: "Your dad asked us to spend this time with you, just like he spent time with us." I hope they'll also explain to my kids how hard I fought to stay alive. I signed up for the hardest treatments that could be

thrown at me because I wanted to be around as long as possible to be there for my kids. That's the message I've asked Laura and Chris to deliver.

Oh, and one more thing. If my kids mess up their cars, I hope Chris and Laura will think of me and smile.

Romancing the Brick Wall

THE MOST formidable brick wall I ever came upon in my life was just five feet, six inches tall, and was absolutely beautiful. But it reduced me to tears, made me reevaluate my entire life and led me to call my father, in a helpless fit, to ask for guidance on how to scale it.

That brick wall was Jai.

As I said in the lecture, I was always pretty adept at charging through the brick walls in my academic and professional life. I didn't tell the audience the story about my courtship with my wife because I knew I'd get too emotional. Still, the words I said on stage completely applied to my early days with Jai:

"... The brick walls are there to stop the people who don't want it badly enough. They're there to stop the *other* people."

I was a thirty-seven-year-old bachelor when Jai and I met. I'd spent a lot of time dating around, having great fun, and then losing girlfriends who wanted to get more serious. For years, I felt no compulsion to settle down. Even as a tenured professor who could afford something better, I lived in a