

Watching Your Grandkids Can Inspire Your Retirement



by Ed Zinkiewicz

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Introduction

Do you have grandchildren? Have you noticed that there is a different relationship between parents and their children and grandparents and their grandchildren?

We grandparents have a whole series of funny things to say about the difference between taking care of our kids and taking care of our grandkids. “If I’d have known how much more fun grandkids were than real kids, I’d have jumped right on past that first set all together.”

Fun is definitely a descriptor for a grandparent’s job. But often there is more to the story. Grandparents don’t just “watch the kid,” they *absorb* the kid! “How cute was that? Isn’t she pretty? Isn’t she smart? Isn’t he fast? Isn’t he just the boss of the group? She is quite the organizer.”

Grandparents pay attention. So, in the next little while here, I’ll be telling you some tales of what I’ve watched and what I’ve learned. Let’s start with rocks.

A Rock With Your Name On It

That's What Explorers Do!



These days my house has lots of rocks around the yard. This is all due to some grand plan my wife has for her gardens. So, this place has a circle of rocks. Over there is a mound of rocks with flowers spilling over. And it all is lovely. Believe me. My wife, Crys, does a great job.

But the rocks don't always stay where they are put.

You see, my grandson is into bugs. Little bugs. Big bugs. Hairy bugs. Ugly bugs. Green ones. Blue ones. Jet black bugs. If it crawls or skitters about, my grandson, Evan, loves it. He has for years.

Evan started going to bug camp when he was a rising kindergartner. Evan's father works at a university where the entomology professor runs a half-day, week-long bug camp for kids. One of the things the professor does is take the kids on explorations. They wander around the campus hunting for bugs.

Evan has done bug camp six times. Starting the second year, his friend Emily came along. The third year Lucy joined in. Recently he and Emily have even volunteered as a "helpers" for the younger kids at bug camp. So now, it is not uncommon for us to look out in the backyard and see those three kids hunkered down.

Do you remember "hunkered"? That's where you used to be able to squat so low to the ground that your bum rests on your heels. Can you still hunker?

Anyhow, here are all these kids, hunkered down, out by Grandma's rocks hunting for bugs. Although you may not know as much about bugs as these kids all do, you do remember which side of the rock bugs live on, right? The underside.

So, here they are. All these kids. Hunkered down. Turning over rocks. And then they dig their fingers in to find the good stuff. If there are several explorers involved, that usually means it is Sunday because that's the day families get together.

Do you suppose that these three musketeers have their grubby shoes on for exploring gardens? Do they have their everyday clothes on to dig for bugs? Oh no. If it is Sunday, that means usually they are getting dirt, if not mud, on their Sunday clothes.

That's what explorers do. They turn over rocks. They dig for the good stuff. They get dirty. Even in their Sunday finest.

Life is about curiosity! Retirement is no exception. Turning over rocks. Digging for the good stuff. Getting hands dirty. When you want to know

- What's going to happen?
- What can we do about that?
- How far does this go?
- How long will it take?
- When did all this take place?

you're going to have to dig in and get your hands dirty. Curiosity is your fuel.

So just what are you really curious about? Is it how to better your bridge game or golf score? Are you curious about what will happen when you get to that vacation destination you've been planning? Are you wondering what the next step is going to be to finish that project, maybe a cabinet or a room remodel? Where you can volunteer?

Maybe you're just interested in learning. What course will you take? Where will the new knowledge take you?

Curiosity. Curiosity is the rubber band that holds your life in tension between "Been there, done that" and "Wow, I can't wait." It is the spark between burnout and rekindle. It is the lubricant that turns what could be a long rough finish into a smoother journey. Curiosity is the hub.

Surely there is a rock out there with your name on it. It is just waiting for you to find what's buried. On the underside.

Thank you, Evan, for reminding me to continue to be curious in my life. If I ever feel my curiosity waning, I will remember you hunkering down with Grandma's rocks.

When Angels Cry

Comfort May Be All I Have to Give



It should not surprise you when I tell you that I love watching my grandson. In fact that reminds me of a time where I was in charge doing just that: watching my grandson.

The Angel

My grandson, Evan, was very, very young in this story. I remember a little boy in the scene that was not all that confident walking.

My daughter, wife, and I were exploring the wonders of a local garden nursery. It was a bright, very warm summer day. The nursery couldn't have been more resplendent. There were blooming flowers everywhere. A slight moisture hung in the air in places that had just gotten a coating of mist from the sprinkler system.

Evan was curious, which meant somebody had to keep up with him. So here I was, trying to catch up and keep up while my wife and daughter made cooing noises over the pots.

We came to a particular place in the nursery where there were shallow steps. And on one step not too far ahead was a small statue—maybe ten inches high. A little, dark gray, partially damp statue, sitting at the edge of a step.

The statue was crying. I was about 12 feet away. I could see clearly a little girl crying. When I came closer, I saw that it was not just any little girl, but rather a little angel. Crying.

And then Evan saw her. He stopped. I knew what he was looking at, but I asked anyway, "What do you see, Evan?" He pointed to the angel. "What is she doing?" At that question, Evan went closer and squatted down for a closer look.

And then he did an extraordinary thing. Evan reached out to the little angel. He reached out to comfort her.

He reached out to comfort her: A crying, stone, angel.

Just how old do you have to be to care for someone in pain? Apparently, you can start at a very early age. The trick for adults is to hang on to those feelings.

To be cynical is easy. We explain away our response, "There is little I can do." Or, we say, "I'm too busy."

So, my grandson reminded me that I could reach out. I agree. I want to see when things aren't right. I want to comfort. That goal is at the heart of what I'm doing today—the writing, the speaking, the workshops. I'm trying to make a

difference. Sixty percent of retirees two to 15 years into their retirement have either not found something they like to do or are unhappy with their choice. So I work today to reduce that percentage.

What is at your center? Are you trying to make a difference as well? Where have you found your “angel,” silently crying and in need of comfort? To get there I urge you to the following efforts:

Avoid the Old Trap

If you’re like me, you put as much work into each day as you could. That emphasis often made exhaustion a common consequence. The effort often leaves little time or energy to make a difference.

Retirement is the place to regain lost time. Lighten up.

That may be easier if you’ve stopped working. But the trick, you see, is knowing how easy it is to fall into the old habits of finding a task and completely filling a day with that effort.

My wife calls the better goal “balance.” A little of this. A little of that. And not too much of one thing.

Retune Your Focus

Money. Prestige. Recognition. Accomplishment. These all came together for some as four crashing breakers against the shore.

Look around. Find what else is out there. You don’t have to focus on the waves. Even though my grandson had a vested interest in running, playing, exploring, he stopped to change focus.

The key to this is empathy. Get in touch with that urge to make a difference. Empathy connects us to another. It recognizes the need we all have to connect with others. Empathy starts with simply noticing someone’s tears.

Assess Your Goals

My years have taught me that I can't always make a difference. So I've often avoided setting goals at all against this ever-present reality.

Evan's encounter with the angel reminded me that comfort may be all I have to give. But I can do that. So can you. Reach out.

How Many Laps You Got Left?

Aging Is Not for Wimps



I've sat on many a park bench with another grandfather and commenting about how welcome it would be if we could bottle the energy of our grandchildren and pass it around.

Do you have grandchildren? I'm constantly amazed at how fast grandchildren go and grow. At and every turn they learn something that I've forgotten and sometimes regret losing.

So, it should not be a surprise if I tell you that I watch my grandson to see what he's into. Of course, I don't want him to fall down a hole. So I keep an eye out for danger, but I also want to see what he's discovering or watch for his surprise and delight at seeing something new. Grandkids don't even know the impact they have sometimes. Let me tell you...

The Lap Tale

This story is about my wife. It can be described by two sentences. My wife knows better. Now.

My grandson Evan was about seven. He'd been taking swimming lessons for two years and was a member of a local swim team, a very popular recreation for young kids in our city.

He came by his love for swimming honestly. His grandmother and I have taken him to the pool from the time he was very little. He loved the water. Swimming seemed to be a natural progression. Besides, his grandmother is "part fish." Evan's lucky he doesn't have gills.

There comes a time in all swim teams when, it seems, you have to have a fundraiser. So seven-year-old Evan, unused to making special requests, came shyly up to his grandmother to ask if she would sponsor him in the coming "lap swim." After some give and take, Grandma agreed to pay \$2 per lap for him to be in the competition.

Then came the hard question: "How many laps do you think you can swim, Evan?" No answer.

He'd never done this before. How would he know how many laps?

"Do you think you could do ten?" his grandmother asked. Evan carefully agreed that he thought he could do ten laps. "Not too bad" she said to herself. "I just hope he can do all ten."

Lap swim day finally came, and Evan started off with great enthusiasm. But after about five laps, he started slowing down. Grandma started to worry, "What if he doesn't make it? I hope he's not too disappointed."

After six laps Evan's coach stepped in. It looked like his coach was encouraging him to save a little energy for the long haul. Good advice. And Evan went back to his laps.

Lap 9 was a bit of a struggle. But lap 10 was immediately followed by lap 11. Which was immediately followed by 12. Grandma was excited, "Good for him. He can really go."

She was saying the same things when Evan went past lap 15. I think she put her hand over her mouth in surprise when he went by lap 20.

I don't want to leave out too many facts from this story. Don't confuse doing a lot of laps with doing a lot of laps quickly! Evan did not finish 20 laps faster than anyone else who swam 20 laps. I don't think Evan has a competitive bone in his body. He just didn't care whether he beat anybody else. All he cared about was getting there.

Now, in the meanwhile, Grandma was saying to herself that the \$40 was for a good cause. At least she didn't have to worry about him finishing 10. He was way past that!

I don't think Evan realized that people his age were just not expected to do 30 laps or for that matter 40 laps, or 50. But that's how many he did without one thought like, "I'm getting to old for this stuff."

Fifty laps would be many dozen more than I could do without remembering my age. My bones would creak, arms would tire, and my wind would be hard to maintain.

Evan finally quit because the coach told him the event was over.

It was \$100 well spent—even if only for what we learned about endurance and persistence that day:

- **Expectations:** What you expect to do can make a difference for good or ill. If the expectation is too low, you can easily fall short of what you might have done. If the expectation is too high, you might surprise yourself by how much you can really do.
- **Age:** Our friend Emma Jo called today to say she'd won three golds and three silvers at the National Senior Olympic Games in the last two days. She is now 70 and has competed in swimming competitions for the past half-dozen years. You're not expected to stop just because of your age.

I challenge you to three things. The first is to find your "50 laps," figuratively speaking. Maybe it will be in a pool. On the other hand it may be on a bicycle or

on a running track. Maybe it will be... (You fill in the blank). Find an activity that challenges you.

In his TED talk in 2012, Scott Dinsmore told a story of how a youngster encouraged him to attempt something he thought he could not do. With those words, Scott was able to start and finish what his mind said was impossible. Scott says, "Think how you would have approached your world differently if at nine years old you found out you could swim a mile and a half in 56-degree water from Alcatraz to San Francisco." Remember, there is no rule that says only 9 year-olds can find their 50 laps.

Once found, learn how to hold on. Why? Because life demands it. If nothing else, you want to keep going to keep up with the grandkids! It will take 50 laps, figuratively speaking, to do so. Aches and pains may be the cost of doing business. My muscles are tired when I get done in the weight room; sometimes they ache a little the next day. I'm no Hercules. But I keep at it.

The third thing to remember is that people are watching.

Here's why. My grandson does not remember the swimming contest that day. I do because it impressed me. My grandson did something I could not do. He also set a good example. Lois McMaster Bujold says, "Ordinary people need extraordinary people so they can say, if he can do that, then I can do this." Evan was that extraordinary person to me.

I challenge you to be an extraordinary person for someone else. You may never know who is watching. Do that "one more lap." When you start to doubt your ability to continue, go ahead and prove yourself wrong. If not for you, then for others who need to see it.

Retirement, you see, is a story about going. And going. And going. It is a story about hanging in there, of holding on. Aging is not for wimps. Who knows, maybe you'll sit on a park bench and be able to pass that bottle of energy along.

A Note From Ed

What motivates your retirement? I cannot think of a better thing than to watch, learn, and listen. Our grandchildren are not just “a reward for not killing our kids.” They can be reminders.

These years we call retirement are not about what we do. They are about who we are. Your grandchildren can help you get in touch. With yourself.

As it happens, I think my grandchild is the greatest.

It would be no surprise if you thought the same of your grandchild or grandchildren. I bet you do! So tell me about him, her, them. What have your grandchildren done that got your attention? Have they told you a little about yourself or how you might be a better person? Drop me a line and give me the scoop: edz@retirementkickstart.com.