

PLANNING PAGE

Name: _____

TITLE OF YOUR PIECE

TEXT STRUCTURE

So You'll Know Me After I'm Gone

What I
wish I knew
about my
grandparents

What I
wished to
experience
with you

Why I
have
to go

What made
me
understand
life

What I
offer
you

Lt. Col. Mark M. Weber

KERNEL ESSAY

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____

SUGGESTIONS FOR QUICK LIST:

What details would you want
people to know about?
What guides you?
What thoughts?

MY QUICK LIST OF TOPICS:

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____

Letter to My Sons (Preface)

Lieutenant Colonel Mark Weber, 2012

Dear Matthew, Joshua, and Noah,

I wrote a book for you. I started writing it long before any of you were born, and even before I met your mom, but it was always written for you.

When I was twelve years old, my grandma Weber died of a sudden heart attack. As we helped Grandpa go through her things, we came across a letter he wrote to her in August 1944. His work kept them separated, he was writing to tell her about his job, the weather—no mention of the world war raging across the sea—and how “it seems like it has been a year here without you.” He was playful. He drew several doodles in the margins, one of which was a man sticking out his tongue. He closed the note by telling her how much he enjoyed the roast and the cake she made for him, and then he drew two birds—one for each of his sons at the time.

The faded letter looked and felt like an ancient treasure, but what impressed me most was that I had never heard Grandpa talk or act that sweet. He didn’t even remember writing it and said it didn’t sound like him at all. That bugged me. I wanted to know more about Grandma. And I sure wouldn’t want to forget what it was like to write a letter like that.

As I grew older, I found that all three of my remaining grandparents were short on details. Of course they had stories, but not always the details I wanted to know about. They couldn’t remember young emotions or reasoning, and they wouldn’t talk about their biggest mistakes or regrets. The questions I had didn’t match the answers they were willing or able to give. I imagined someday I would have grandkids (yes, grandkids) who might be just as interested in me as I was in my grandparents. And so I started writing a journal, and I kept it brutally honest. Looking back, there’s a lot of stuff I’m really not proud of but I figure maybe those ugly things reflect my growth through the years. This book comes from that journal.

Of course, I imagined one day sharing these stories in person, but now I’m dying, and I realize I might not even get to share it with you boys, let alone with any grandkids.

If attitude alone determined survival, I would live another fifty years. Unfortunately, our bodies get a vote, and my forty-year-old frame is giving out way sooner than it should. Despite some breathtaking treatments, I still have cancer, I can’t have any more surgeries, and the chemo is failing. I may look invincible in my army uniform or while cutting down trees with a feeding machine strapped over my shoulder, but to suggest that I’m not dying is just dishonest.

So I started thinking about ways to tell you my stories.

There’s an eighteen-year-old boy inside of me who sees the three of you quickly approaching the age when I started really thinking about life. That boy stood out on a parade field twenty-three years ago as a day-four enlisted soldier in the army and listened while an unseen narrator passionately recited an adaptation of General Douglas MacArthur’s famous 1962 speech to the cadets of West Point. The words and the accompanying music pulled at the hair on my arms and neck, and I felt tears roll down my cheeks. For the first time—and forever after—I understood life was much bigger than the things that were happening around me.

I committed the speech to memory and have recited it with the same passion during countless retirement ceremonies and military holidays over the past twenty years. You three were all just babies when the army recognized me as one of the best company-grade officers of the more than thirty thousand in the army. The honor? The General MacArthur Leadership Award.

The truth is, I’m not a big fan of Douglas MacArthur and never have been. I attended a military high school and have been in an army uniform since age fourteen, so I knew who MacArthur was when I first heard his

Letter to My Sons (Preface) (Continued)

Lieutenant Colonel Mark Weber, 2012

words. He always seemed more movie character than actual man, and it struck me then that if you want to be a real-life man, you have to learn from real-life men.

But his speech to those young men is about being a real man. It's about life as a struggle and our need to embrace it, about the contradictions and complexity and confusion, about the courage and search for wisdom required to get through it all, and about coming to it all as honestly as a man can reasonably do.

So when it came time to share with you what I've learned about life, I knew I had to draw on that speech just one more time—with the three of you as my aspiring young "cadets," and each chapter framed in a moral from that speech.

Matthew, when you were twelve, I tried to offer you some advice after a brief discussion on some mundane subject, and you interrupted me. "Dad," you said with an elevated tone to get my attention, "I'll figure it out." You were right then, and you're still right. You had asked the question, gained some context, and then set out on your own course. With such understanding, I have faith that the three of you will indeed figure it out. And so these pages reflect observations and perspective rather than advice or instruction. Though I'll speak with my usual conviction and passion, I know I gained those attributes over a long period of time and in the same manner Matthew expressed. My stories are not examples of the way to live your life; my stories are just examples of an infinite number of paths.

Which one should you take?

With the help of many other people you'll meet in your life, you'll figure it out.

Along the way, I hope you'll consult these pages as often and as casually as you would if I were still here and you could pick up the phone. I hope you'll ask this book different questions at different times in your lives. And I hope you'll find answers or perspectives to match.

I hate writing this letter, but I would hate not writing it even more. Nothing can replace the long talks I hoped to have while fishing or driving to some far-off adventure with you, just as I got to do with my dad. But, thankfully, I've been blessed with enough time to pass along the most compelling experiences of my life. As sad as the reasons are for writing any of this, let's see if we can squeeze some joy out of it before I have to leave.

Love,
Dad

Note: Before Lieutenant Colonel Mark Weber passed away, he left his sons with the gift of his thoughts. In this introduction, he explains why he is writing. The piece takes the reader on a journey, using a structure that we too can make use of when we don't want to regret leaving things unsaid. The structure moves the reader along, from sadness and regret toward understanding and warmth and, in the process, gives us a way to use writing to transform our grief. In this classroom exercise, students are asked to use the foundational structure of Weber's letter—his focus on wishing things were different, realizing that life must come to an end, understanding life, and making an offering to another person—to craft their own "So You'll Know Me After I'm Gone" essays.