

This letter, written by James Kerney to his three sons on July 29, 1931. It was published three years later in the "Trenton Evening Times" on Monday, April 9, 1934, the day after he died.

❧ *A Letter to 3 Sons* ❧

My Dear Sons:

I am naturally much interested in the kind of things you write about. And yet I wonder if any of you realizes the magnitude of the undertaking of preparing yourselves for the job of newspaper running. It is the most fascinating game of them all, and it is also the most exciting. It requires not only enormous patience, but great human understanding and endless industry, if it is to be done right.

First, there is the making of the paper itself; the news and editorial departments. They require courage at the right time, and charity at all times. You are always dealing with frail human nature and your work is spread before the critical eye of the public every day. There is no place to hide. You are always on parade. There is entirely too much disregard, in most newspaper offices, for the poor and un-influential. They are the folks who most need generous consideration and, at the same time, the duty of the paper must ever be kept in mind.

That duty, first of all, is to give the public the actual news of what is happening, impartially and without bias. No other calling, not even the church, has a greater obligation - or if it has, meets it with such courage. Back of the news should be the reputation of someone for outstanding honesty and courage to do the right, but to do it fairly and with a due regard for human weakness. There is no human perfection and newspaper judgment is not always right. But it is the clear duty of the newspaper man to make an honest endeavor to do the right as God gives him to see the right.

The editorial end is the second line, and there not only fearlessness, but a decent regard for others is essential. What is the square thing and what is the best thing for the community should ever be uppermost in the mind of the editorial director.

And when you have made a good newspaper, and have kept in mind all that is owing to the community, in the way of leadership and generous giving to things that make for a better place, comes the problem of mechanical production. That can only be acquired by patient study and close attention to details.

When you have the product ready, the next step is to get it distributed - circulation. That, too, needs the closest attention, in order that every possible reader may be garnered. Of what use is it to produce a newspaper, with lots of character behind it, if you are not going to have the widest distribution?

Lastly comes the gathering of the advertising, which, too, must be done with a decent regard for the merchants and others with whom you are dealing. They are apt to think only in terms of dollars, which is natural, as they have to pay the freight. Always remember that they are entitled to consideration, and try to put yourselves in their shoes. They struggle hard to make financial headway and they have a right to feel that everything should be done to see that they get their money's worth. My policy with them has always been that, unless they find advertising with us profitable, we do not want their business; we are not benefice monks. Where they can be properly favored, I am for doing it; in that way I have always gotten along well with them. They know I am anxious for them to succeed, because, unless we can help make a fine city, where labor is well paid and people are comfortable and happy, we have failed in our job.

Always keep in mind that in our business, which covers every line of human endeavor, everything is grist for the old mill. If you get a chance to spend a night on a yacht, grab it; but don't get the yacht habit, which is useless. The experience of being on a yacht will someday come in good stead. The best experience I ever had was working as a boy in a grocery store. We not only had to know all about everything from soda crackers to mackerel, but we also had to learn to be patient and polite to the buyer, no matter how humble or how finicky. Then I worked in a shipping office, where we had to be just as polite to a steering prospect as to the purchaser of the suite de luxe. We needed them all to fill the ships. We need them all to fill the newspapers.

Always keep simple; never get high -hat; a pleasant word costs nothing and good manners cannot be put on for State occasions. If you are not polite to the waitress, you will sometimes fail to be polite to the hostess. And, as Kipling remarked, they are all alike under the skin. Industry and good manners are the best of all virtues.

Keep a sense of humor and be kind to everybody. Don't develop superior traits, even if you feel you are superior. The smartest folks I have known have been the simplest; those who understood that were living in a dumb world, but made the best of it. Be affable to duffers who think they are important; you never can tell where and when they can do you a good turn. Nobody is really of much importance, because the whole life of the greatest man is brief. Always keep in mind that life is too short for you to be small.

Our office has sometimes been impatient with me because I happened in the newsroom, when some poor, hard-driven soul was pleading to keep a line out of the paper about her boy - never a bad boy, mind you - but it would embarrass her in the neighborhood if the paper printed the fact that Johnny was drunk and had been given ten days on the farm or fined \$3. What difference does it make if poor Johnny, working as a truck man, did get tight and was picked up by a cop? They are the kind of poor devils who should have a little charity shown to them. The more kind things you do, the happier you will be. The real business of a newspaper is protecting the public from outrages from politicians and rich high-binders, who live as smug leaders of the community while they lift your watch.

Let me reiterate: Every contact you make in life will someday come in handy in a profession that deals with every phase of life. Sometimes a policeman will give you one of your best beats; other times it may come from a judge; if you are always polite, you will find yourselves cashing in along lines you little dreamed of. I recall one election night in the old *True American* office. They had all the returns complete save only Union County. Savory, who was a great news editor, was tearing his hair as the press hour approached. I had been working like a beaver all night on local tables and he finally appealed to me to know if there wasn't some way I could get the finals from Union County. I went to the telephone and called a number in Elizabeth and after a few pleasant words, asked the end to dig up the missing districts. "All right Jimmy," said the voice and in twenty minutes he called back with everything complete. When Savory heard me say, "Good night, Governor, I'll give you a pleasant mention in the paper some day for this," he almost dropped dead. Then he came to and asked: "Who got these for you?" And I told him my friend, Governor Voorhees. He almost wept with joy. Then I informed him that I had a working understanding with the Governor, by which I went to the State House early every morning and opened all his personal mail, so that I might get a few early wire stories for the Newark News to buy bread by my babies. He was flabbergasted. So make every contact you can, high or low; life is the great thing after all.

Affectionately,

Father