

A Letter to Professor Fred Zacharias's Sons in Memory of Their Father

ANNE LUKINGBEAL*

Dear Blake and Eric,

You two are the reason I agreed to write a few words about my memories of your father, whom I have always referred to as “Fred Z.” You see, my father died many years ago when I was twenty-two years old, and I realize now that I would value comments from his friends who knew him as a young man. Alas, other than from my mother and my father’s brothers and sisters, few such memories were recorded, so I am left to guess about many details of my father’s life. Therefore, although I knew your mother and father a long time ago, and then only for six or so years, I am delighted to have the opportunity to share a few brief memories in this special edition of the *San Diego Law Review*. I am grateful to have the chance, even from my limited perspective, to tell you about this truly wonderful and unique man.

I first met Fred Z. in the fall of 1983 when he came to Cornell Law School as a new tenure-track professor. He and Sharon had recently married and quickly became a part of a tight-knit, little social set of seven or eight young teachers and their spouses. I say tight-knit because we all saw quite a lot of each other not only at work but also in the evenings and weekends. Almost nothing was planned that was not done as a group: picnics at the state parks, sledding parties, birthday parties, and endless baby showers. Even going to the movies was a group

* Anne Lukingbeal is Associate Dean and Dean of Students at Cornell Law School.

production, often with shared babysitters. People in this little group were in the early stages of building their families—several already had a few children. Others, such as your parents, were in the initial stages of having their first baby. It was really quite remarkable that in 1986 six members of the law school faculty had babies. With hindsight, I suspect we all clung to each other at least in part because the collective muted our fears of the unknown. I will resist the temptation to put on rose-colored glasses and label this era an idyllic one, but for sure, none of us realized how complicated life might get later for all of us. In its simplicity, these times are now very pleasant to contemplate. But I will try to stay brief.

All this contact—both professional and social—made for endless opportunities to talk about concerns of the day: What had Doctor Kyong—the obstetrician of choice among the young law school faculty set—said at your most recent prenatal visit? How big was your baby estimated to be? Were you choosing to have amniocentesis (still a pretty new and hence controversial idea)? Had Dr. Kyong uttered the dreaded “C” word—Caesarean section—or were you likely to be able to prove your maternal mettle by having the baby “naturally” with not a drop of anesthetic? Remember that this is more than twenty years ago, and birthing fashions can change pretty quickly. Your father brought to this engrossing and passionate environment the precise same traits that he had already exhibited as a friend and colleague. He was very earnest and dedicated much time to informing himself as best as he was able. He read all the baby books, went with Sharon to every single doctor’s appointment—she can correct me if my memory is wrong—and emerged from each session with questions for the rest of us. Had Doctor Kyong also warned each of us about eating too much fish or for some reason were Fred and Sharon being singled out for this particular piece of advice? Fred applied the same level of intellectual commitment to the parenting process as he applied to his now famous scholarship. By the time you were born, Blake, he may have known just about as much about the birthing process as Doctor Kyong himself. He had certainly armed himself with lots of information about what might go wrong. Always, with Fred Z., there was an intense energy: if he sensed that his passionate concern was a source of amusement to those who preferred the pretense of a more laissez-faire parenting style, he ignored it. With Fred Z., you always got what you saw. He was the opposite of a hypocrite. He kept right on expressing his concerns and asking his questions. Your mother’s temperament is not the subject of these memories, but suffice it to say that Sharon was so easygoing and relaxed towards just about

everything in life that she appeared to be the perfect match for Fred Z. And, although Fred Z. knew all the potential pitfalls of childbirth, fortunately none of them occurred.

From the start, it was clear that Fred Z. would be an excellent father. He was so proud of you, Blake. In the environment I have just described, comparisons about these 1986 babies were inevitable. You were among the smaller by weight—for many years I could have told you exactly what you weighed, as could all the others in this group, but mercifully I have now forgotten such once-important details. But you had much more hair than any other child. The hair was not only amazingly abundant but also stood up as though you had just received an electric shock. Some observers thought it made you exceptionally cute. Once you arrived on the scene, Fred Z. literally beamed with joy. He also set about finding a suitable house for his growing family: he went through a number of exhausted realtors in his quest for a home that was the right size and a fair price, in a suitable neighborhood, not far from the law school, with no obvious or hidden safety flaws. I still think of Fred every time I walk by a certain house on the Northway in Ithaca. Fred and Sharon had made an offer, but radon was discovered in the basement. No amount of cajoling about the removability of radon would convince Fred that this might be an acceptable place to raise his family. In all things related to his family, Fred was a perfectionist.

Despite his pride in his family, Fred never succumbed to the temptation to brag—this cannot be said about all of us in the group, and his lack of bragging endeared Fred to me and no doubt to others who eventually wearied of the competition. He had plenty to brag about. In fact, I was witness to Blake's taking his first steps—multiple and very steady, I might add—at the age of only seven months! Fred had brought Blake into my office after one of the milestone pediatrician appointments. Fred never mentioned this precocious ambulation to anyone that I am aware of—his silence on the subject forced me to run around telling all members of the group what an amazing sight it was to see a seven-month-old boy walk. We all knew that early walking might be a sign of extremely advanced intelligence, so precisely when a baby took these first magical steps was thought to be a very telling detail. Eric was born several years later—Fred and Sharon had returned from a year's sabbatical with him and so no similar detailed analysis is available from me, but once again, Fred Z. beamed with pride at the new addition.

And a year later, you all moved away to San Diego. Sadly, although I saw your father a few times for lunch at America Association of Law Schools meetings and saw your mother at least once, we lost touch. But please do not think that is because I had stopped thinking about Fred Z. Oh no! He was such a unique combination of very strong traits—really smart, really funny, very loyal, and totally honest in a way that sometimes may have annoyed those used to more personally strategic behavior from those not yet tenured—that I will never forget him. My hunch is that you are aware that your father had these virtues. In fact, the world will be a better place if you both inherited these characteristics. But if I had to pick the one trait among them that would be the most special to inherit, it would be his offbeat sense of humor. It really brightened the day of those with whom he shared his zany comments. For instance, I recall when a mutual friend won a new car in a drawing at a basketball game and his amazing good luck was being discussed in the faculty lounge when Fred walked in. Fred poured a cup of coffee and gathered enough details about the conversation to say over his shoulder as he left the room, “He will have to pay taxes on it, you know.” If you inherit this sense of humor, I predict that handling life’s inevitable ups and downs will be easier for you than for others similarly gifted with intelligence and talent but missing the very dry humor.

Well, I could go on at even greater length about my memories of Fred Z. For instance, I could move on to recalling his surprising athletic ability: he was a star member of our faculty basketball team. But I promised brevity. So let me close by saying that I hope your lifetime of memories of your father will sustain you and your mother through the very difficult days ahead. Fred Z. was an unforgettable character and truly a “class act.” As long as his many Ithaca friends are drawing breath, he will be remembered with great fondness here. And if the idea of an Ithaca visit and a walk down memory lane with a friend of your father’s has any appeal at all, now or in the future, please just let me know.

Sincerely,

Anne Lukingbeal