Dear David,

Nobody ever wrote me a letter like this, and you may not be interested just now, so I’m mailing you a hard copy just in case...

Nobody appreciates unsolicited advice, so I’ll try to restrain myself. Your mom says I’m pretty bossy.

I have a lot to be grateful for, still enjoying an active, busy, interesting life, in good health, and feel wonderful, thanks to good doctors and a couple of spare parts.

It’s a wonderful life, an exciting life. It’s exciting because everything changes all the time, and what worked yesterday may not work today or tomorrow. This means that we shouldn’t expect the same results to problems we face. We are constantly challenged to problem-solve all over again. An auto mechanic today can’t fix cars with the same techniques and tools he could twenty years ago. Cars are made differently, and are computerized as well as mechanized. The auto mechanic who has not learned to work with computerized systems is out of luck, just like the driver who doesn’t know how to operate a standard shift car! It is a lot easier for a driver to learn how to drive a car with automatic transmission than it is for a mechanic to learn to repair an automatic transmission. So
be warned, if you want to drive my little red car, you’re going to have to master the stick shift!

Normal is different every day. The climate is changing and weather patterns that were predictable based on historical records are no longer as accurate as they used to be. If you are a farmer, you need to pay close attention to warmer weather patterns. If you are planning to buy a house, you may want to think twice about buying a beach house.

And about climate change, United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki Moon recently said, “This is the first generation that is capable of eliminating poverty, and the last generation that is capable of saving the planet.” I hope you will give that some thought as you journey through your life.

Adaptability to change is critical to healthy survival at work, at play, and for intellectual and spiritual growth. This can be disconcerting because we like security, we like to know what’s going to happen, we like to have our expectations met. I like knowing that my newspaper is going to be on the front porch by 6:30 every morning. I know I can get the same information online, but it doesn’t feel as good as the paper rattling while I turn the pages and struggle to keep all the pages under control.

Some people plan their lives. They decide what they like, what they need, what they want to accomplish, make a plan and figure out
how to get there. Then they set out and do it. I’ve always envied people who knew what they wanted, made plans, and followed them. Often they succeed, and sometimes they don’t. Something changes. Perhaps they discover when they begin putting a lot of time into their plan and their profession, that they don’t really enjoy it. This is called a “learning experience”. Something changed, or turned out to be different than expected. Perhaps something within the person changed. You see, we are all plastic. We are all flexible, and our bodies and minds change as we develop and learn and master new skills. This is why it is not a good idea to get married too young. Not only does the world change, but we change. Our likes and dislikes change. Our interests change. As we learn and grow, our values may change. Certainly, we will question our values, where they came from, and whether we can be true to them or need to rearrange them or change our priorities.

This may be uncomfortable. I remember growing up in a home where my parents supported Republican candidates for office. And so did I. Until I went to the University, studied history and political science and discovered that my values were more liberal, less conservative than I had been accustomed to. Lots of arguments, civil but vigorous, resulted from my change in thinking. My parents were more patient with me than I was with them! As I recall, I was pretty obnoxious and rarely missed an opportunity to let them know that I
disagreed with them. This is called “growing up”. We come out of the nest and look around at the world beyond, our viewpoints widen, we ask a lot of questions, and begin to figure out what kind of person we want to be, what kind of person we want to become. We learn more about what we like, math or philosophy? Literature or biology? Politics and government or music? Hiking, biking and outdoor life or poetry? Fortunately we can change our priorities and goals and plans as long as we live.

We just have to keep asking ourselves questions as we take one turn and then another.

What kind of world do I want for me and my children?
How do I want to make a living and what do I need to do to support myself and a family?

What inspires me? Lights my flame? Moves me to action and indignation? What am I passionate about?

What do I want to change in the world?
What do I want to change about myself?

Am I leading a healthy life? Eating nutritiously, exercising, watching my weight? Because if I’m not, I can’t achieve my goals or move forward swiftly on any of my chosen paths?

Life is mysterious, and that is what makes it so much fun. We will never understand it fully, in spite of all the scientific discoveries and almost magical inventions that enable us to do so many
different things. Computers and computer programs that enable us to see more of the world. That bring far-off places right into our vision. That enable us to communicate instantly with friends and relatives all over the world. That enable us to go to college on our laptops and continue to learn jillions of things without ever leaving home. As long as the electricity doesn’t go off and we can recharge our batteries.

We need all the help we can get as we forge through the fog of life. We can’t do it alone, or we can’t do it alone very well. Learning to make friends – and to keep friends – is pretty important. Disagreements are natural. What is important is to maintain friendships past disagreements. Sometimes that requires humility. Humility goes a long way in most aspects of life. And humility can be difficult, especially when you think you are right and others are wrong. Humble pie never tastes very good, but it goes down a lot easier early on than after you’ve discovered that YOU were wrong and the other person was right. Trust me.

Differentiate between what you know and what you believe. And you can always change either one. You can learn more and increase your knowledge. And you can ask yourself – every day – what you believe. It is important to ask this question, because the answer is what centers you. Your belief system gives you back bone and the sturdiness to humbly stand for ideas and philosophies. Your
belief system and your values guide you when you face ethical problems and all of a sudden someone asks you to do something you don’t believe is right. You stop. Wait. Don’t commit. Think about those values and what you believe. I have a simple formula. How do I want to feel about myself after this decision is made? When your belief system and values are firmly in place, that question can be helpful. I don’t worry about what or who you believe in. Most religions and belief systems have similar values. Honesty, not killing, kindness, caring for others, respect for others, generosity. What is important is staying in touch with your values that guide your behavior.

So stop, wait, think, as yourself: How do you want to feel about yourself tomorrow? Then decide.

Remember, it is ok to change. It is ok to change your major. It is ok to change your job. It is ok to change your profession. It is ok to move to a different place, a different town, a different part of the country, perhaps to another part of the world. But remember to do your best, and remember to come home. Stay centered. Ask a lot of questions. Talk to people you respect. Talk to people who care about you. Listen to your heart as well as your mind. There’s no way to know which path to take. But if you stick with your values, and it doesn’t feel right, you can always change. Remember that Robert Frost poem?
Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

The fog will clear, and it will come back. Don’t be afraid. Trust yourself. Lean into your values. Listen to your heart. The world is out there. Make it your own. Take care of your world. Love your family and your friends. Forgive people. Be generous. Make peace. Apologize when you are wrong. Spend time every day thinking about how to get rid of poverty. Spend time every day thinking
about how to save the planet for you and your children. Then do it.
You’ll be just fine.