

Hey Ray,

It's me, you're buddy. Lately I've been troubled with the thought of here vs there. You know, what's where I am, and what's where you are. I'm carrying a lot of doubt and confusion. I'm walking the line, but often question why. I've been advised often, by our faith, to try just "talking" to God, or "talk" to my dad and ask him to talk to God for me. I find this to be compatible advice for my nature. I don't traditionally pray anyway. I like to just talk. So, today I'm talking to you.

I knew you for 47 years, and we didn't speak much about God, belief or faith. I can't get out of my own head right now. I can't let you go. I called your phone thinking your voicemail mail would reveal this was all a sick crazy joke that only you were capable of pulling off... Something like, "Hi, this is Ray, I can't get to the phone right now cause I'm dead." Then that hardy, happy, practical joking laugh would come. Instead, no ring and right into voicemail with no outgoing message. A dead phone in symbolism of a dead buddy. After the realty set in, which took more than a day, I began to deprive myself of deserving the right to care about you. Being that it has been a handful of years since I saw you last, my mind decided I wasn't allowed to care about you. I minimized our friendship just because I haven't seen you recently. But, this morning, I began to recognize what I was doing to myself, and realized what a disservice I was committing to you and me. I think it was just an automated defense mechanism, because the fact is, you are so much a part of me. My life would be incomplete without the thoughts and memories of you. My life would be incomplete without the experiences and bond we had. The rest of the guys feel the same way. With me here, and you there, you probably know all this, but I'm gonna keep talking. Dan, Jim, DJ, Bill and Tony are all blown away, too. None of us believed it. You were such a unique funny human being that we were convinced you were joking about your own death. Even though it was blasted on Facebook and we were bombarded with texts and calls, we smirked as if we were certain you were about to let us Kindergarten buddies in on your joke. We know you better than anyone. This was your craziest practical joke by far. We held doubt for about 2 days. We looked at the rest of the world like they didn't know what we did. When it was just us Washington School kindergarten group connecting, we all questioned each other in a tone of, "Ok, let's get this cleared up. Ray took it too far. What really is going on." I bet you're laughing now, cause it's so you to leave us this way.

When we were in first grade, we'd play in the attic room of your house. I remember when you found playboy magazines, and snuck them to that attic. We were, what? 10! You laughed harder at the fact the you actually obtained the magazines as opposed to what was in them. Second, third and fourth grade, we'd go to CCD together every Sunday. Remember the time we used our CCD books as sleds to slide down the huge hill in Heady Field Park? We got in some serious trouble from the CCD teacher.

He called us vandals. How about those childhood experiences that stay burnt deep in our memory still to this day? When we were 7 or 8, you accidentally hit me in the head with a rock you threw from 50 yards away. Mariano Rivera couldn't have made that shot. Blood everywhere, broke up our sisters' soft ball game. Or, how 'bout when I ripped up your home work in 7th grade because you wrote on my sweater with a crayon. By then, there was enough incidents that our moms both told us to stay away from the other. Yours would never blame you, and mine would never blame me. We didn't listen. We spent countless hours together. We grew up together. We went through puberty together. You realize it wasn't until the eighth grade where we started to notice girls? No one knew how insecure we actually were. Only we knew, along with our same old crew from kindergarten. Any attention we received made us so uncomfortable, and the fellas didn't make it any easier the way they loved to tease us and keep us grounded. Remember in the 8th grade I'd piss you off, and you'd stop talking to me except to say, "You're dead after school." Knowing I couldn't win that fight, and loving a practical joke, you were great at making me unsure if you were joking or not. It scared the shit out of me all day. You never did kick my ass, you always let me off the hook. In High School, we were pretty much inseparable. Dan, Jim, DJ, Bill and Tony still there. Our moms tried to break us up again when I drank beer for the first time at a party in White Meadow when we were 16. Coming home, our car got hit from behind, and there I was again with a bloody head. I was close enough to run home and you followed. Only in 1981 would a father send you home at midnight because he was pissed that we fucked up.

With me here and you there, are you sick of the same stories? Probably not, because the best thing about you was that you appreciated me. You appreciated all your buddies. You wanted me as your friend. You wanted the fellas as your friends. You wouldn't have traded us in for anyone. You got insulted if I wasn't being a good friend, and you never were a bad friend in return. You never faltered. You showed a particular pride in me as well as the rest. You were always there! You were the funniest, personable, eccentrically enjoyable person to be around that I ever met. You never judged anyone, close friend or distant ones, you did not judge. I loved being with you. We finished High School working at jobs to buy nice cloths and go out. College separated us a little, but still so many experiences and memories from infrequent visits in those years have made my life complete today. The cherry on the sundae of our bond, was our days in LBI. It was you by my side as we transferred from the single girls we knew to the girl who is today my wife. You were the first of all the fella's she met. The summer of 1992 spent with you was absolutely among the best times I have ever had in my entire life to date (52 years).

You then moved, pal. I remember how disappointed I was when you left, but it didn't keep us apart, with your mom still in NJ it made for those random visits that I will never forget, and the unforgettable times I visited you in Dallas. They always felt like a

rewind back to grade school when you moved from Church Street to Flag Street. Growing up in our little town back then, you might as well have been moving across the country, but it didn't keep us apart than either. We had so many memories in your flag street house. Specifically, the one simple Rayism that has lasted since we were all 17, "Which one of you sleazy friends drank all of Al's beers." It was this memory out of the thousands that brought me to tears today. It was this simple memory of your humor and special mannerisms that drove me to talk to you here, while you are there. I got the bad news 9am yesterday. It is now 3am a day later. I'm checking my phone, and the group email from the boys is still rotating and growing with emotion. From Dan, then bill, then me, then DJ, then Jim. Then Jim again, then DJ, then bill. and so on. Back and forth, all of us, still trying to hold on to the thought that this isn't true.

*As of lately, phone calls, texts and Facebook took you in Texas to me in NJ, and I wish we did more than that. If God just waited a few more month I think that Giant / Cowboy game down by you was gonna happen. But, today its worse, today all that brings you to me is this talk. I'll keep talking though pal, because that is what I'm told to do. Maybe it helps you there, and maybe it will help me here. Every night I go to bed, a cross I wear (that was my dad's) hangs just enough for me to comfortably hold it in the palm of my hand as I settle to a sleep position. I talk to my dad every night, maybe you can find him. I will add you to that same talk. They aren't usually too long, but they are resilient. Until we talk again, buddy, I have only one regret of our friendship. I may not have needed to say it cause we both knew, but other than those Budweiser buddy moments, I never said it with sincerity, I love you... **April 29th, 2017***