

Memo to Jake

by Vic Berecz

Our grandson, Jake, read and enjoyed *The Hunger Games* ... all three books. He recommended the books to my wife who read them also. She had previously followed his recommendations about the *Harry Potter* series and the *Percy Jackson* books. When she suggested I read *The Hunger Games*, I decided to give it a try. I've just finished the first, and am not sure if I'll read the others. I can't seem to really get my head into the rather obvious story line without constantly rehashing the underlying premise. How do you explain this to a ten-year-old? I'm not sure, but I'll give it a try, right here in public.

Memo to Jake: Your grandmother and I were always very pleased that you not only learned to read early, but that you enjoy reading so much. When you started the *Harry Potter* series a few years ago, we were both surprised and proud of your ability to distinguish between reality and fiction. You seemed to fully understand how to enjoy and immerse yourself in a story. Yet, when you're done reading, you can step back and function well in the real-world of a 21st-century schoolboy.

I guess I'm not as good as you in separating reality and fiction. When I read the first volume of *The Hunger Games* my mind continually went back to the idea behind the book ... that *America the Beautiful* was no longer beautiful ... that our nation tore itself apart and what was left was a small elite exploiting the great majority. In other words, what was left was the Dark Ages dressed up in the costumes of the future. I cannot accept that idea, even in fiction. It hurts too much! We can't and won't do that to ourselves!

Some of the things I want to talk about will sound pretty esoteric ... there I've started already ... let's just say it'll sound pretty far-out and maybe even a little boring. But, over the next few months, even kids your age won't be able to avoid the political ads on TV talking about *history repeating itself*, *slippery slopes*, and the *loss of our traditional freedoms*. Others will poo-poo the idea of being *a part of a community*. Those are the things I thought about as I read *The Hunger Games*.

Yes, history does occasionally repeat itself ... but it doesn't *have to* repeat itself. People talk about the end of the Roman Empire and the entire western world declining into a period known as the *Dark Ages* when time seemed to go backwards. Pretty much everything went to pot for everybody ... except for the handful of fabulously rich people who ruled their little countries for their personal benefit. Most people ... your ancestors included ... ended up in poverty, their health deteriorated instead of improving, knowledge was lost rather than gained. It took extraordinary effort for the common people to just keep from freezing on cold winter nights and to keep from starving year round, just as it did for most of the characters of *The Hunger Games*. In the real world, it took a thousand years to break out of that pattern and restore progress. The idea that lurks beneath *The Hunger Games* is that America repeated the mistakes of Rome, producing a similar result ... a *New Dark Age*.

Some folks claim we in America are already on a path that will lead us toward that *New Dark Age*. They say we've started down that *slippery slope* by limiting the *freedoms* that the founding fathers of our nation fought for. Others believe those same people are just looking out for themselves and maintaining their personal wealth and power. You'll hear these two sides call each other liars in their ads. But, Jake, you live in Connecticut where there's snow and ice in the winter. You've walked on slippery slopes. You have enough common sense to be careful when the footing is dangerous. And yes, you've successfully gone down slippery slopes and gotten to

where you needed to go. The same thing is true in the bigger world of politics and government. Sometimes *We the People* who make up the community we call the United States of America need to step carefully out onto a slippery slope that will keep us on, or lead us back to the path needed to achieve our goals of liberty and justice for all.

But, many people see any change to what they consider to be America's traditional freedoms to be a careless step onto the ice of that slippery slope. They forget that our founding fathers were very smart men who laid down general principles of government, recognizing that as times changed the way those general principles were interpreted also had to change. They would not have expected us to live the way they did, nor would they want us to do things exactly as they did them over two hundred years ago.

We live in a much more diverse nation than they did. That diversity is the result of two hundred years of immigration. To a great extent, it's those immigrants who made the United States as blessed and prosperous as it is today. Those immigrants are your ancestors ... whether a poor peasant farmer from Ireland or Hungary, or a blacksmith from Germany, or a merchant from Puerto Rico. They all helped build the America we know and love. We need to continue to welcome immigrants to our shores and encourage them to work with us toward achieving the American dream for all.

We live in a much more crowded nation than those founding fathers did. This is neither bad nor good ... it is simply a fact. No longer does it take 90 percent of the population to adequately feed our nation. Now 5 percent of the population can feed our much larger nation and still have enough left over to help feed a hungry world. That means the other 95 percent of us live in or near cities. Being crowded together creates both problems and opportunities ... and, it certainly does make change necessary. We can't live this close together and act as if we're off by ourselves on a frontier. Over the years we've changed our habits and ways of life to deal with this new closeness. That change must and will continue.

So, do we have to give up our freedom to live in our modern society? I say, NO! What we must do from time-to-time is to venture out onto those slippery slopes and redefine the details of those freedoms ... the general principles set out for us by the founding fathers ... to conform in a common-sense way with the changes that have taken place, and will continue to take place, in our nation and world ... and in all the communities we are a part of.

Yes Jake, you are a member of many communities. Obviously, you're a member of the community that is your family; and you're an American, and so a part of the 300-million plus member community that is our nation. But, you're also a part of the communities that make up your state and your town. You're a member of your school community. You're a member of the FUSA community. You're part of the community of neighbors that live on that old hill in the corner of Fairfield. Yes, like everyone you are part of many communities and each of these communities has obligations to you, as you do to them. We human beings are not loners. It is only through cooperation and teamwork that we have progressed so far in the last few hundred years. Think about how you can make each of your communities just a little bit better. All that little stuff adds up to building a changing, and always better, America and world.

On second thought, maybe I will read the remaining volumes of *The Hunger Games*. You said the second is better than the first ... and I'm willing to listen to advice from everyone.