

JUST KEEP breathing

A Shocking Exposé of
Letters You Never
Imagined a Generation

Would Write

REGGIE DABBS and
JOHN DRIVER

it started off with nothing
contemplated the main reason
the mark
im
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'pon
THE
MAIN
ASON
I will not
give
up,
but it's
hard when
had told me to drop
and
my
Angels
when I kept
years
their
initiated into a
They are looking
want to kill me
what I deserve?

THEY CONFRONTED HIM
HAPPENED
I was meant to
I would
I try to die
I don't know
what happened
to me
and stay
parts
telling
me
to
kill
myself
THE BIG
WORK
A YEAR OR
TWO LATE
AND HE
KILLED
HIMSELF

CHAPTER 4

Quality and Quantity

LETTER 10:
*I WAS CALLED STUPID, DUMB, OR
STUPID F***ING GINGER 307 TIMES*

“ZACH”

Dear Reggie,

*I Zach would like to thank you for coming to X Middle School. You really did change my life. I am a redhead and the first year I moved here (December of 201X) I was made fun of. In the first week I counted 307 times I was called: A) stupid ginger B) dumb ginger and C) stupid f***ing ginger. 307 times. . . . I contemplated running away but I don't know what happened to make me stay, your speech today really really helped my morale, it is just nice to know I am not the only person who has been made fun of. Thank you so much, I now know there is going to be more meaning in my life and I can make sense of what's happening now in the future.*

*Thank you so much brother,
Zach*

Reggie's Reply to Zach

Dear Zach,

When I was in the sixth grade, I was called Fat Albert 281 times in one day. I'm kind of glad to know I'm not the only one who counts things like that. But my adoptive father changed my outlook on the whole thing by telling me something so simple: "They call you Fat Albert because they are jealous. You got a cartoon, and they got nothing!" Zach, I believe they make fun of you because everybody wishes they had the hair color you have.

I went to the University of Tennessee (UT) in Knoxville for my first year of college. I was born and raised in Knoxville. Needless to say, I am a huge Tennessee Volunteers fan, and ginger is one of the greatest colors on the planet! Okay, I'm just saying I'm jealous. I wish my hair was even close to UT orange.

You see, a different perspective can change everything. Zach, you are who you are, and you can't change that, but neither should you want to. The world needs you just the way you are—even with all the flaws, if you want to call them that. To me, your hair color is far from a flaw. I'm just saying.

And I'm not the only one. I look out at so many big crowds all over the world, and I see thousands of people who spray paint their hair the color yours is naturally. So one man's horrible thing is another man's "I wish I could have" thing. Have you seen me? I'm bald! I would take a hair color of any kind right now. Again, I'm just saying.

My point is simply this: you *are* great, and you are *going to be*

great—period. No matter the color of your skin. Big or little. Tall or short. Orange, brown, or purple hair. It does not matter to me, so don't let it matter to you either. No matter who you are, you are made just the way you are so the world will be a better place. We just need you to stay in it and be different.

So just shine—just the way you are. Keep going, my brotha, because you're awesome!

I Got Yo' Back!

Reggie Dabbs

LETTER 11: *PEOPLE CALL ME A BABYKILLER*

“HAILEY”

Dear Reggie,

I hope you get the chance to read this. I am 17 years old and a senior at XX high school. A few days ago I was ready to end my life. A guy that I have spent two years on broke my heart and told me I was a slut and a dumbass and told me he hated me. I was hurting so bad I carved what he said to me in my arm. I look at the scars as a reminder of the pain he caused. I was pregnant last year with his child and he left me and said the baby wasn't his. I felt alone and scared and the baby wasn't developing right and I got preclampsia. I had an abortion. People call me a babykiller . . . they don't understand that I lost a child. I feel like I'm in a hole that I can't get out of. My family doesn't have money for me to get treatment. I don't know what to do. Well here's the poem I wrote.

QUALITY AND QUANTITY

*A heart that once had a beat
A pair of eyes that once were bright
A soul once so clean and neat
A smile once shown with light*

*A life filled with hurt and pain
A body beaten and left as a bruise
A broken mind never fully sane
A battle fought an added lose*

*A deep cut on her precious skin
A thousand tears forming a pool
A loss for life, for death a win
A stupid girl, a b****, a fool*

*A father's complete absence
A mother's cruelty
A step father's rape presence
A life check, a reality*

Reggie's Initial E-Mail Response to Hailey

Dear Hailey,

It hurts me to read the words in your e-mail, but I am so happy that you shared this with me. See, I believe we all are on a path. Sometimes we think we are alone, but we look up, and someone is walking with us. Today that was me on your path

and you on mine. You helped me keep on stepping. I hope I did the same for you. Please remember there is a reason for the pain, a reason for the shame, a reason for the hurt. We just have to hold on for the answer. I will hold on with you.

I Got Yo' Back!

Reggie Dabbs

Hailey's Reply to Reggie

The pain is indescribable. I cry every night and pray that I don't wake up the next day. What life is this? Not one I want to live.

Reggie's Reply to Hailey

Dear Hailey,

The first thing I want to say is, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry for your loss and your pain. I was in Ireland on a school tour, and I was leaving one school to go to the next when a girl yelled out at me, "If you could have any superpower, what would it be?" I stopped and looked at her. "I would have the power to take away your pain."

I wish I had the power to take away your pain, but I can't. I want you to know that words do hurt. Words cut so deep, and

sometimes we feel we can never ever forget them. In your poem you said that you have a broken mind. Maybe so. But I believe time heals wounds, and time heals words. Out of all the words that can hurt and cut down, causing us to bleed on the inside, I believe there is one word that can heal everything: *love*.

Love can change it all. Even words such as *rape*. Yes, love can change that. Words that make us feel like we can't move or even breathe, but love can make us breathe. So I just want you and every other person out there who feels like this—who writes poems like this—to know one thing: I love you. The fat, black man loves you, and we are going to make it. So never ever give up. Keep breathing. Keep breathing.

I Got Yo' Back!

Reggie Dabbs

Hailey's Reply to Reggie

Hi Reggie,

I thought I was doing better but a few nights ago I broke down and caved in and went back to my old habit of cutting. After I cut I felt better. Then today I had an anxiety attack that turned into rage and I broke my hand from punching holes in things. I don't know how to fix my problem. I feel like I am falling apart and I'm stuck living a life I don't want to live.

Reggie's Reply to Hailey

Dear Hailey,

Some days we wake up and think that we have taken twenty steps backward. We think we are so messed up that we could never recover. But no matter how many times you wake up to find yourself back in that horrible place again, you have to remember that you are still waking up! You are still alive and breathing.

Even if you have taken ten steps backward—broken hearts, even broken bones—you are capable of making those steps back up. If you will just keep living, then your hand will heal. You can redo a wall, but you can't redo a life.

Hold on! Fight for your right to survive. Fight for your right to live. Fight for your right to be happy because happiness is coming; you just have to be here when it arrives. Never give up.

I Got Yo' Back!

Reggie Dabbs

LETTER 12:
*MY DAD SAYS I DON'T
DESERVE A BIRTHDAY*

"JASMINE"

Dear Reggie,

My name is Jasmine. You spoke at my high school last week. Xville. I sat close to the back so you probably didn't really see me. I wore the grey hoodie, if you noticed the 3 girls one was crying that was my friend D. I was very close to crying. I thank you for coming to my school. I almost started crying when you were telling the story about the girl who cut herself. I tell you that to tell you my story.

About 3 years ago, I started having problems with my stepdad. I was really stressed out and I picked up the habit of smoking cigarettes. Well, I got caught smoking, and got in trouble. I tried to tell them why I started smoking. No one listened. A couple of weeks went by and my birthday was the next Thursday, Oct. XX. Well on my

birthday, I called my dad and just wanted to talk to him and my stepmother were going out to eat. I asked them if I could go with them since it was my birthday. He told me I didn't deserve anything for my birthday and that I didn't even deserve a birthday.

When he got done telling me that he said he had to go when he hung up he didn't even wish me happy birthday or he loved me. I was crushed. So after that I laid on my bed crying thinking about all the things going on in my life. It was too much for me, I figured everyone would be happy if I was gone, so I went into the bathroom and busted a razor open and tried to kill myself. If my mother hadn't seen my cut mark, I probably wouldn't be here. I still have problems to this day with my father.

I now live with my father. To me he's not much of a father. I am sixteen, I was a unsecure person back then. I have basically raised myself. I love my mother, she's the only thing I really have in my life.

Your friend,

Jasmine

Reggie's Reply to Jasmine

Dear Jasmine,

The first thing I want to say to you—in writing so that forever everybody will know I said it—is:

Happy Birthday to you!

Happy Birthday to you!

Happy Birthday dear Jasmine!

Happy Birthday to you!

(Can you hear my beautiful voice singing through the pages?)

I know many people in the world have had that song sung for them, but, Jasmine, we wrote it in the book for you. Why? Because that's how special you are. I know sometimes you get overlooked. Sometimes people are forgotten by those who should never forget. But Jasmine, we are not going to forget. You are not overlooked.

I am so glad your mom saw your cut before it was too late. We see it every day in someone's life. We catch glimpses of the scars. We don't always know their names, but we see them. We see you. And I know we can't call you out by your real name in this book, but when I met you that day in your school, I saw you. I did not know then that your name is Jasmine, but I cared then, and I still care now.

Many times people will not know your name, but they will still reach out to try to help you. Jasmine, I want you to know that when you felt so lost—you didn't know me, and I didn't know you—there was a coach in your school who knew you. He was the one who made the phone call asking me to come to your school.

There are principals and teachers who know you; they are friends to you even though you may not think of them in that

way. You see, they brought me to your school, hoping I would be able to help you. Hoping someday you would realize that somebody really does care.

And it worked! You did realize it, and that's why you wrote us. Your problems may not be gone because you know we care, but knowing it is the first step to breathing another day—because another day will bring another chance to live and see your circumstances change for the good.

So listen very carefully—you will always be loved. And all those birthdays that everybody forgets, you will remember that your daddy, Reggie, put it in his book. Happy birthday, Jasmine!

Never give up!

I Got Yo' Back!

Reggie Dabbs

EXHALE 4: *SILENCING MOUTHS OR CHANGING MINDS*

Can you even imagine what it feels like to count the number of times someone calls you an insulting name—and to count past three hundred? Or can you imagine pain so great that you carve words into your arm? Maybe you know all too well.

One of the reasons Reggie is so effective at helping heal the hurts of so many people is that he has faced so much hurt himself. It is easy to think of only the big parts of his story—the shame of being born as the result of a twenty-dollar bill, being given up by his biological mother, living life not knowing the identity of his biological father. If we are not careful, we might inadvertently ignore much of the stuff from Reggie's life that many normal people face every day. Name-calling. Being made fun of. Life in a confusing teenage world.

I think what we are figuring out through the journey of these letters is that the little stuff is not really that little at all. We do not need to have a dramatically tragic past like Reggie's in

order to feel drama or tragedy. Those seemingly minor issues of life can build up inside of us like credit card debt—a little charge here, a little purchase there. No one means to do it, but before we know it, we can find ourselves in a hole of debt from which there is no escape.

This is much like the words we use. They seem so small and insignificant when they leave our lips, but they can accumulate to become the building blocks of everything we believe about life, relationships, and even ourselves. Little words. Big impact.

In Zach's case those little words built up into some pretty big problems, to the degree that he wanted to run away from home to escape them. And take note of the focus of the words used against him: his hair color. Really? Could something so small really become something so big?

Negative words often start off as simple observations about the way someone looks, acts, or sounds. We tend to talk the most about those things that stand out the most to us, especially when those things make us different from one another—speech, height, skin color, clothes.

Negative words are so powerful because they often contain something that is true or at least partly true. There is not one of us on the planet, no matter how popular we were or were not in middle school or high school, who did not walk through the doors of our school with a feeling of insecurity or self-consciousness over something—anything, really. It is just part of adolescence.

To a teenager, that tiny zit in the mirror looks as large and

looming as Mount Kilimanjaro about to erupt. That one bit of hair that will not just behave and lie down feels like a giant shark's fin to a teenage girl—she can even hear the ominous theme music from *Jaws* playing every time she walks down the hall. Or perhaps a teenage boy cannot afford the same designer clothes as the popular kids. He views himself as wearing a wardrobe of *rags*, all because of designer *tags*—or the lack thereof.

So when we walk into a situation and are already supercharged with insecurity over whatever—real or imagined—we think we are different from everyone else, and we teeter emotionally, like a game of Jenga waiting to collapse. All it takes is one tiny word or sentence to pull the linchpin block and send our world crashing downward. Maybe these kinds of words are something to which you can easily relate:

Wow, nice hair!

What's wrong with your clothes?

*Out of the way, f***ing ginger!*

*You're a slut and a dumb a**!*

Bullying almost always starts with words. Rarely does a person just naturally escalate to physical violence or property damage. Words are the currency of the social economy, and bullies try their hardest to get rich quick at the expense of others.

If words are currency, then we are seriously inflated with negative bills. Excessive negativity devalues our opinion of words,

desensitizing us from reality and tempting us to spend more and more negative words. Television, movies, music, and video games do not help the issue. We are accustomed to speaking harsh, violent, and inappropriate words because we hear them all the time in whatever media entertains us.

These are some of the reasons that kids in elementary school and middle school have such an impressively tragic arsenal of words to use against one another at such a young age. Remember that Zach was a middle school student when he was cussed at 307 times in one week just because of the color of his hair. Does this not seem at least a little extreme to you? Many middle school students are still watching cartoons every afternoon—maybe the same kids!

A 2007 Department of Education study showed the incidence of bullying and injury to be almost twice as high among sixth graders as twelfth graders.¹ These kids are not yet able to drive a car, pay taxes, enlist in the military, or get married, yet they are capable of using razor sharp words with such skill that the recipients are cutting themselves, running away, or killing themselves or others. Yes, almost every tragedy can be traced back to seemingly little words that are spoken.

We know one book cannot stop these trends. However, we do believe that one person can influence the trend in his or her circle of influence. Does this sound unrealistic? I submit Reggie as Exhibit A: one person making a difference in people's lives everywhere he steps. And there are many more examples of both adults and kids, some of whose stories we will read about in the

coming pages. Your story may not be in this book, but you can be one of the examples.

Words make a difference. That is why Reggie speaks to Zach as he does—not to deny the fact that Zach is different but rather to celebrate it. Being different is not something to be ignored. Ignoring it can inadvertently add to the shame so many feel. Much of modern society's answer to this problem has been to stop acknowledging differences. To never reference someone's race. To make everyone wear the same clothes. But differences are not the problem—how we address the differences is the issue.

Silencing mouths without *changing minds* is only treating the symptoms, not the origin of the problem.

Reggie shows up on the scene calling himself fat and black—declaring white kids, black kids, Hispanic kids, Asian kids, and all other shades of ethnicity to be his own children . . . each just a different shade of chocolate. Is this politically correct? Perhaps not. Should everyone try this methodology? Definitely not. However, we must face the fact that being politically correct is not proving to be the ultimate solution. It may be better than nothing, but *silencing mouths* without *changing minds* is only treating the symptoms, not the origin of the problem. What we don't need is fewer words, just more of the right ones.

Hailey's letter strikes hard at this issue. Reggie helps her with more than just the difficulty of harsh words spoken but also the ultimate tragedy of a life lost—and the life of a baby, at that. If you are anything like me, then your heart breaks for Hailey and the pain she is facing seemingly alone.

Though we will discuss suicide, self-harm, and depression more in the coming letters, for now I must say that the tragedy of Hailey's situation is double for me because people in her life seem to possess the power to help, and they have chosen not to. In fact, they seem to have chosen to do more harm instead. Words such as *babykiller* are not easily forgotten, and the hole that Hailey references in her heart has only deepened with every cruel word spoken.

Reggie speaks what she needs to hear—words of love. But as we follow their discussion, Hailey's responses reveal that Reggie's positive words cannot fix things the first time. And in the case of Zach, being verbally abused with more than three hundred various forms of “ginger” does not magically melt away with one encouraging Facebook “message.” Though it sounds strange, what we need is not just *quality* words but also a high, steady *quantity* of them.

Reggie stands out in this world for more reasons than his physical size, his skin color, or even his amazing story. He stands out because of his positive words—and the sheer volume of them he dishes out every day to millions around the world. And look at the results. People are obviously anxious to hear something other than what they hear every day.

Few words in this book are as powerful as Hailey's poem, except perhaps Reggie's words in response to her when she is anguished over her continual relapses into depression, anger, and self-destructive behavior: You can redo a wall, but you can't redo a life. I once heard Reggie say something very similar about getting stuck on roller coasters: They will always fix the ride, but will you still be on it when they do?

We can and must reverse the cultural trends. We must learn how to speak the right things at the right times. Words are like the wind: we can speak a cool breeze or a devastating tornado—the choice is ours. Sometimes words are all we have to give. So think both quality *and* quantity. Try this when you are helping friends, children, or students with problems: imagine that you must speak as many replacement positive words as the negative ones they have already heard, if only just for that day. Since these negative words may have come from others or even themselves, they could be quite numerous.

What we need is not fewer words but more. We need a revolution—a literal reversal of the epidemic we face wherein people only seem to know how to speak destructive words.

Breathable Moment #4: Words are like the wind: we can speak a cool breeze or a devastating tornado—the choice is ours.

Little words can make such a huge difference. Words like *happy birthday* that Reggie said to Jasmine. Do his few words

reverse the horrible words that her dad spoke to her? No, but they still make a difference. They still give someone the breath to the keep hoping, and maybe the hope to keep breathing.

Can change really happen around the world? Who knows? But it can definitely happen in you. Why not start there and see where it leads. Like Reggie, your words might keep someone breathing another day.

SIGNATURE 4:
LEAVE YOUR OWN IMPRESSION

1. Were you shocked at the number of times Zach was called by a derogatory name? Why or why not?
2. Why do you think the problem with bullying is more severe in middle school than high school?

3. In what ways do negative words store up like currency or debt? What negative words are stored up in you?

4. How did you feel when you read what Alexis's dad said about her not deserving to have a birthday? Could you ever be capable of saying something like that to someone you love?

QUALITY AND QUANTITY

5. Do you think it is true that people need more than a high quality of words, but also a high quantity of them? How does this change your viewpoint of dealing with people in crisis?

Notes

A GENERATION ~~is~~ WAITING for YOU to CARE

"Readers who need a resource for understanding and approaching the life-changing pitfalls of youth will find much to take away from [this] book. Dabbs spills his giant-sized heart over every page and challenges readers to begin doing the same as they work to engage with the young folks in their community."

—*Publishers Weekly*

For those who dare to listen to the truth, tragedy, and triumph found in the desperate words of a generation eclipsed by the white noise of a culture too busy to care, incredible stories are unearthed. *Just Keep Breathing* is an alarming yet inspirational exposé of just a few of these stories—the actual letters, honest responses, and, ultimately, the real hope for a generation we all should own.

One of the most sought-after public speakers in the world, Reggie Dabbs has shared his own incredible story with millions of students and adults during the last twenty-five years. Now, as a result of social media, many of them have shared with him their own staggering stories. Additional insights and "Breathable Moments" for educators and parents—anyone moved to action by the issues of this generation—are provided by coauthor John Driver.

Just Keep Breathing supplies both the inspiration and information needed for you to respond confidently and appropriately, to see those you care about make it to another sunrise.



Reggie Dabbs has spoken to professional athletes, stay-at-home moms, and high school students, relentlessly chasing his personal passion around the globe by sharing his astonishing story of tragedy, redemption, and hope with millions of people each year. An acclaimed saxophonist, Reggie lives with Michele, his wife of more than twenty years, and their son, Dominic. He is also the author of *Reggie: You Can't*

Change Your Past, but You Can Change Your Future.

John Driver, MS, is an author, speaker, and fifteen-year community leader, advocate, and mentor. As a former public educator, he has authored or coauthored more than a dozen books. He lives near Nashville, Tennessee, with his wife, Laura, and their daughter, Sadie Jane.



W PUBLISHING GROUP

AN IMPRINT OF THOMAS NELSON

thomasnelson.com

COVER DESIGN AND LETTERING

BY CONNIE GABBERT

ORIGINAL PACKAGE DESIGN

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FAMILY & RELATIONSHIPS / Life Stages / General

USD \$16.99 / CAD \$21.00

ISBN 978-0-7180-7719-8



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