

I Wish I Knew You Better

I know what it is to live with regret.

Don't let this soft-spoken, quiet appearance fool you. I was a horrible teenager. No, I didn't get tattoos or exotic piercings, nor did I drink or do drugs. But before you start to think that my actions as a teenager were harmless, let me paint you a grim picture. When my dad asked me to hug him, I frequently said "No". I never wanted to spend the energy to do things with him, despite his many requests--whether it was playing tennis or going for walks on the beach, I always "didn't feel like it". I would pretend to fall asleep whenever I heard him coming into my room so that I wouldn't have to talk to him. And on the few occasions that I did say "I love you" to him, it was never initiated by me--it was always just an automatic response.

I have no logical reason to explain how I acted. Even now, reading that paragraph, I am disgusted with myself.

My dad was a very loving dad. He always made sure we went on one big vacation every year, no matter what. He would spend hours researching the destination and planning our itinerary down to the minute, just so our days would be packed with fun activities. And if there ever were a McDonald's within 5 miles of our hotel, my dad would go out jogging in the morning and have a hot breakfast ready for us when we woke up. When my dad finally got his dream job, he decided to commute 1½ hours every day to and from work, just so we wouldn't have to move. He worked long hours and weekends, just so we could live a "good life". I didn't realize it then, but it was his way of saying "I love you more than myself".

About a month before my 21st birthday, I lost him. Forever. No more would I receive those calls from him whenever he and my mom were at a restaurant. No more would our family go on vacations while he quizzed us on facts that he had memorized from the informational signs in national parks. No more would I get to hear his voice, smell his Oil of Olay-scented face, or feel his warm embrace.

But most of all, I couldn't tell him how sorry I

was.

Did he know that I still loved him through all those years? Was he able to tell that through all my rejections of his attempts to reach out to me? I would never know. Many times I've pondered the question of "If I could just have that one last moment with him again, what would I say?" And I think my subconscious has answered that question for me--on the rare occasion that he does appear in my dreams, I always inundate him with "I love you's" and hug him for dear life.

In the year after he passed away, aside from the immense guilt and regret I felt, I found myself reminiscing on all our memories together. I remember how my dad patiently taught us how to play baseball in the backyard by promising to buy us McDonald's for each hit that we got. He loved hearing us play the piano and would often "request" songs, even though I'm sure we sounded less than perfect. No matter what we did, my dad was always proud of us. When my parents helped me during orientation week at Cornell, my dad was so excited that he made us attend every single informational session possible, and there were some he even went to by himself because my mom and I were tired.

These days, I wish he were still here...so that I could tell him what has been happening in my life. From getting into grad school to pursuing my dream of becoming a teacher to going on my missions trip to Brazil and experiencing the joy that only comes from Jesus--these moments and so many more are ones that I'll never get to share with him. I don't think I can watch a father-daughter dance and not tear up. And to think that my future children will never get to know their fun-loving grandpa Albert, well that's a loss that they'll never be able to fully understand, try as I might to explain the wonderful father he was. There are days where I just can't believe that I can't pick up the phone and talk to him...I dearly miss and long for our relationship.

And so, with the help of a good friend, I realized that I didn't want to go through life having to learn my lesson twice. There's a scene in *The Pianist* where Adrien Brody's

family is on their way to a train that would ultimately take them to a concentration camp, and Adrien Brody turns to his sister and says, "Halina, it's a funny time to say this, but...I wish I knew you better". I never thought that I would lose my dad so early in my life. As a kid, you think that you'll have your parents forever. If there was anything that I needed to learn from my dad passing away was this one thing- if something happened to my mom at any moment, I didn't want to "wish I knew her better".

To give you some background, my mom and I had an okay relationship. We talked about once a week (despite her constant pleas for me to "check-in", she ended up being the one who initiated the call 99% of the time), but it was always small talk and we never talked about anything deep or substantial. Besides, her "without-a-doubt, asked-every-time" questions about 1) finding a boyfriend and 2) moving back to California were starting to annoy me. And so, our conversations stayed short and our patience with each other even shorter.

I knew it didn't have to be this way. I knew that our relationship could be so much more.

Because I'm better at processing my thoughts on paper, I decided to write my mom a letter for Mother's Day. In it, I told her that I loved her and always have (even though I know that sometimes I wasn't so great at showing it). I apologized for any moment that she ever felt unloved and admitted my share of the blame for the current state of our relationship. I expressed my desire to be completely open with her and my willingness to put forth the effort that would be required for this relationship to grow. I also told her how great of a mom she was and that I was eternally grateful for having her and my dad as my parents.

Not soon after, I got a phone call from my mom. My heart was racing. Should I pick it up? What did she think of the letter? What if she hated it? Finally on the last ring before it would go to voicemail, my hand flipped open the phone. "I read your card," she said. "And...?" I asked nervously. "I loved it". I couldn't believe my ears. Apparently, my mom loved that I came forward and initiated this tough conversation because although she was feeling

the same way, she said she probably wouldn't have had the courage to do so. We talked for hours that night. We talked about what we were going to do in the future to make sure that we worked on our relationship. We talked about my brother graduating from Cornell and how much my dad would have liked to be there. We cried together as we talked openly about my dad for quite possibly the first time since he passed away three years ago. She recalled this incident that happened in 3rd grade where she relentlessly teased me about the boy I had a crush on, and after my repeated attempts to get her to stop, I lost it one day and told her, "I'll never tell you anything ever again!" I have no recollection of this at all, but to this day, she regrets having teased me because she felt like that was what caused me to start closing up to her. For fifteen years, she remembered that fateful moment and wished she could take it all back. And now, she was getting her chance.

I'm not going to sit here and tell you that things changed overnight. No, it has been a long process and it continues to be. And although things have become easier, I know we still have a ways to go. But the difference is that we're both consciously making an effort to work on the relationship and neither of us are willing to let it "fall by the wayside". I don't believe that we'll ever reach a point where I can say that we're done working on our relationship, but at least now if something were to happen, I wouldn't have to utter those sobering words "I wish I knew you better", and *that* is something I can live with.

~Stephanie (January 2009)