

I'm Not Upset With You...

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At first glance, many people jump to the conclusion that my relationship with my father is perfect. We talk on the phone frequently, he supports my decisions and, every once in a while, he takes me shopping. Many would see a typical "daddy's girl," but looks can be deceiving. Being on the inside of the relationship is much more straining that it appears to be. Because he was brought up in a small, southern town in Tennessee, his ideas about success are different from my own.

In January 1953 everyone in Columbia, Tennessee, knew that James W. Dale had been born. News traveled fast and continued to do so in that same community when I was born many years later in a different part of the country. When I was young, many would say that my father did have a "daddy's girl." We played outside together in the snow, climbed trees and played in the sand box. But when the time

came to work, we were to sit down and get the job done. He would typically go to his office across the street and, when he had to, he would bring me along with a coloring book and some crayons. That was how life was. But after my first day of kindergarten, everything changed.

The dinner table was the first place where things changed. He no longer asked, "What did your dolls do today?" but asked, "What did you learn in school today?" Early on, the answer was simple: "Today, we played dress-up, had snacks, went outside and Ms. Sanner read us a book about birds," I would say. A few months later, the questions got more difficult: "What kind of birds did you talk about? What do they eat? Where do they go in the winter?" Naturally, I answered every question with much enthusiasm, even if the answer was wrong. The next year report cards started coming home, and if my situation was hard before, it was about to get worse.

When I was in the third grade, the second report card of the year came home in a sealed brown manila envelope. Next to the science section was a note written in red ink: "You are doing well in science, but you may need to do some more work at home." I was done for. The ultimate worst. The end. At the age of eight, I sat at the kitchen table and listened to my father talk about how important grades were in school and how hard I had to work to get a good grade. The little talk ended with "I'm not upset, I just know you can do better and do not want to see something like this again." Luckily, Mrs. Whaley had still given me an A. There is no telling what the "talk" would have been otherwise.

For the rest of third grade and the next seven years, there was never need for another "talk." But then junior year of high school came around, and so did the advanced placement, or AP, classes. The third marking period had ended and yet again those report cards came out. Instead of in manila

envelopes, the home-room teacher passed the pieces of paper with our fates written on them. Scanning down the list, I felt my stomach rise to my throat. I saw what I knew would send me right back to the kitchen table, but this time Daddy would be worse. No more third grade. No more mere suggestions to study more. I thought the apocalypse was coming, and there was nothing to do about the catastrophe but face it head on.

As I was slowly driving home, the endless list of possible excuses for a "B" in AP US History started flowing: "We did not know what was going to be on the test." "It was a pop test." "There was more than one right answer." "The teacher tried to fail everyone!" But I knew my excuses were lame. My father would have a response to each excuse that was equally as good as the excuse itself.

At five thirty the garage door opened, and I made sure everything looked like I was seriously studying instead of check-

ing out the latest video on MTV. He knew it was report card day, and within a minute of walking in the door, he found my report sitting on the island in the kitchen in the form of an 8x10 piece of printer paper. His face dropped as he saw it. Pretending not to notice he had it, I kept on reading and defining terms as they came up in the text. Slowly heading towards the table in disbelief, he kept looking at the paper in hopes of making it change or hoping it was incorrect. He slowly pulled the chair across the table back, and there he sat. "Is this correct?" he said. The nerves hit even harder than before, and all that came out of me was a nod of the head.

During that time he talked about the importance of studying every night and keeping on top of school work. He reiterated that college professors do not check up to make sure homework is completed, and if daily study were not routine, I

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My Life in a Hospice Family

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My mother looks like any other. She has a petite build, and her hair is somewhere between salt and pepper and just salt. She has two daughters whom she raises by herself. She can do all sorts of motherly things: cook a dangerously good lasagna, sew matching Easter dresses for her girls, and sense when one of them is not really as sick as she claims to be. She has all sorts of "no arguing about it" rules: unless you're vomiting or have a temperature,

you will not be picked up from school early, and no, you are not getting a toy at every checkout line that we go through. Although none of this is uncommon among mothers, there is something about my mother that is rather uncommon: she was a home hospice nurse.

My mother's being a hospice nurse was not just a part of her life that was neatly put away when she came home each day; it was a way of life for her, for my sister, Heather and for me. When my mom reflects on these hospice-days,

she tends to express regret for putting us around death and disease so much. She jokes that she hopes that she didn't "screw us up" too badly or that it did not affect us too much throughout those years. When these conversations arise, I assure her that hospice did in fact affect me in a very large way, and that is not to say that it "screwed me up."

One cannot be around a hospice nurse for very long and not be affected. These unique nurses are much like the new shirt in the laundry that leeches dye all over the other

clothes, only instead of dye, they spread this strange idea that death is okay and sometimes not only okay but the best possible ending to an illness. I grew up unaware that I was contracting these strange opinions and thoughts about death. Until I was much older, I had no idea that you are not supposed to talk about death and certainly not in a positive manner.

When my mother's pager went off with those three shrill beeps that were not entirely detached one from another, my sister and

I would listen as Mom called the answering service and then the patient's family. While my mom spoke with the family, Heather and I would listen intently and try to discern what we had ahead of us. If the call was about resetting a pain pump, we were in the clear because that could be done over the phone, but if it was a call that a patient had died, we knew that we were about to spend time in the navy blue Ford Windstar. It was in this minivan that I picked up these atypical views on

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