



The Valentine Letters

Yesterday I wrote two letters, one to each of my sons. When I finished writing the letters, I folded them three ways, slipped them into clean white envelopes, and licked the sealing glue. On the outside of the envelopes I wrote my sons' names before tucking both letters into a file folder containing my property deeds, life insurance policies, and beneficiary papers.

A local teacher told me recently that every Valentine's Day she asks the parents of her Montessori class to write a letter for their son or daughter to be displayed on the classroom bulletin board. In the beginning years, the parents' love letters were short and written on paper commonly found in kitchen desk drawers and household cupboards. But over time, this assignment grew into somewhat of a contest among the parents. Their expressions of affection for their children flourished into grander and more unique works of art. Collaged, painted, and printed Valentines the size of rock star posters began to appear. Expensive paper, glitter, ribbon, and antique lace Valentines came in earlier and earlier, grabbing prime positions on the classroom bulletin board. The text of the Valentines grew longer, as parents stayed up late at night crafting poetic and prosaic pieces of heartfelt love for their children.

This year on Valentine's Day, one overworked lawyer mother arrived, daughter in hand, only to realize she had forgotten about the Valentine assignment. Stopping in the doorway of the classroom, the woman let go of her daughter's hand, reached down into her leather briefcase, and pulled out a standard legal pad. With a black Bic pen she wrote, "You are the

most loved daughter in the world.” She tore off the sheet of paper, walked up to the bulletin board already bursting with testaments of love, and searched for a small empty space and stray thumb tack. Once her yellow paper was securely attached to the board, she bent down beside her daughter and said, “This, my love, is all you’ll ever need to know.”

Over the years I have increasingly given my sons written and non-written declarations of my love for them. And while I know they would not think it necessary, I can’t imagine leaving my sons a file folder of important documents that did not include two final Valentines. I spent several days thinking about what to say before I began to write. I scanned my memory for words with enough holding power to last for years to come. I thought about what my sons would like to hear from me yet one more time. And, of course, I suffered all the usual parental doubts, conscious of the meagerness of paper and pen when attempting to express my children’s significance in my own life.

Both of my sons are now grown men with young children of their own. As I wrote the letters, I found it reassuring to know that they too feel up close the deeply woven cords of love between parent and child. When my older son’s first baby was several months old, he called long distance to thank me for all the nights I’d gotten up with him so many years before. With a new life in his own hands, he was better able to reach back to his own loved beginnings. For the first time perhaps, he saw himself mirroring me, bent over his own son in the middle of night, soaking in the smells and sounds of the child he had once been.

My own mother wrote me my first letter shortly after I’d arrived at the Convent of St. Joseph in Omaha, Nebraska. I was 14 years old at the time and had gone far from home with the idea of becoming a School Sisters of St. Francis nun, living a life of Godliness and Goodness. As aspirants we were allowed to receive and send letters once a month. I’ll never forget sitting down in the convent courtyard with that first small cream-colored envelope addressed to me. After a handwritten detailed description of the fall crop of cantaloupe and the new white-faced steers my father had bought at the South St. Paul stockyards, my mother ended her words to me

with, “Don’t miss us because we don’t miss you.” Being my mother’s daughter, I didn’t know any words of love either at that time, so I simply wrote back every month reassuring her that I wasn’t homesick, that I was doing well studying Latin and playing violin in a community where we little nuns were following in the footsteps of the real nuns.

When my sons went off to college, I began to send them letters, and they in return sent wonderful accounts of their new campus lives. One son wrote from a rocky outcropping in Utah on the day he turned 18, high on dreams and hopes and swept away by the natural beauty all around him. The other son wrote letters from the art barn on his campus, where he spent long nights working in a last-minute sculpting frenzy to meet an assignment deadline. Over the years, both sons and I kept corresponding. I would find odd little postcards and write made-up stories on the back about our house being transformed into a camper-trailer in the middle of the desert or how I had learned to ride an ostrich and wished they were there to ride along. They’d include in their letters photographs of ski trips, art competitions, and new loves. And because all three of us had become skilled in the language of affection, our letters always ended with words of love.

The letters I wrote yesterday were from beginning to end letters of love. To each son I wrote fond remembrances from the major stages in their lives. I told them again how much I have enjoyed being a part of their becoming who they are today. I wrote about my great pleasure in seeing them in their present roles as sons, fathers, husbands, workers, and learners. I expressed my wishes for their futures: that they both might experience much joy, fulfillment, and happiness in all the days ahead.

That I will not be here with them for very much longer was the most difficult part of the writing. I was not surprised to find myself writing them a final letter. I just couldn’t stop crying because I had to do it so soon. My own mother is still alive and watches with pleasure as her great-grandchildren color in coloring books and tell their just learned knock-knock jokes. We all like to think there is a natural order for the generations to die off, but often we are dead wrong in our predictions.