
it was everything

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In the doorway of my home, I looked closely at the face of my 23-year-old son, Daniel, his backpack by his side. We were saying good-bye. In a few hours he would be flying to France. He would be staying there for at least a year to learn another language and experience life in a different country.

It was a transitional time in Daniel's life, a passage, a step from college into the adult world. I wanted to leave him some words that would have some meaning, some significance beyond the moment.

But nothing came from my lips. No sound broke the stillness of my beachside home. Outside, I could hear the shrill cries of sea gulls as they circled the ever changing surf on Long Island. Inside, I stood frozen and quiet, looking into the searching eyes of my son.

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What made it more difficult was that I knew this was not the first time I had let such a moment pass. When Daniel was five, I took him to the school-bus stop on his first day of kindergarten. I felt the tension in his hand holding mine as the bus turned the corner. I saw colour flush his cheeks as the bus pulled up. He looked at me-as he did now.

What is it going to be like, Dad? Can I do it? Will I be okay? And then he walked up the steps of the bus and disappeared inside. And the bus drove away. And I had said nothing.

A decade or so later, a similar scene played itself out. With his mother, I drove him to William and Mary College in Virginia. His first night, he went out with his new schoolmates, and when he met us the next morning, he was sick. He was coming down with mononucleosis, but we could not know that then. We thought he had a hangover.

In his room, Dan lay stretched out on his bed as I started to leave for the trip home. I tried to think of something to say to give him courage and confidence as he started this new phase of life.

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Again, words failed me. I mumbled something like, "Hope you feel better Dan."

Now, as I stood before him, I thought of those lost opportunities. How many times have we all let such moments pass? A boy graduates from school, a daughter gets married. We go through the motions of the ceremony, but we don't seek out our children and find a quiet moment to tell them what they have meant to us. Or what they might expect to face in the years ahead.

How fast the years had passed. Daniel was born in New Orleans, LA., in 1962, slow to walk and talk, and small of stature. He was the tiniest in his class, but he developed a warm, outgoing nature and was popular with his peers. He was coordinated and agile, and he became adept in sports.

Baseball gave him his earliest challenge. He was an outstanding pitcher in Little League, and eventually, as a senior in high school, made the varsity, winning half the team's games with a record of five wins and two losses. At graduation, the coach named Daniel the team's most valuable player.

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His finest hour, though, came at a school science fair. He entered an exhibit showing how the circulatory system works. It was primitive and crude, especially compared to the fancy, computerized, blinking-light models entered by other students. My wife, Sara, felt embarrassed for him.

It turned out that the other kids had not done their own work-their parents had made their exhibits. As the judges went on their rounds, they found that these other kids couldn't answer their questions. Daniel answered every one. When the judges awarded the Albert Einstein Plaque for the best exhibit, they gave it to him.

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By the time Daniel left for college he stood six feet tall and weighed 170 pounds. He was muscular and in superb condition, but he never pitched another inning, having given up baseball for English literature. I was sorry that he would not develop his athletic talent, but proud that he had made such a mature decision.

One day I told Daniel that the great failing in my life had been that I didn't take a year or two off to travel when I finished college. This is the best way, to my way of thinking, to broaden oneself and develop a larger perspective on life. Once I had married and begun working, I found that the dream of living in another culture had vanished.

Daniel thought about this. His friends said that he would be insane to put his career on hold. But he decided it wasn't so crazy. After graduation, he worked as a waiter at college, a bike messenger and a house painter. With the money he earned, he had enough to go to Paris.

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The night before he was to leave, I tossed in bed. I was trying to figure out something to say. Nothing came to mind.

Maybe, I thought, it wasn't necessary to say anything.

What does it matter in the course of a life-time if a father never tells a son what he really thinks of him? But as I stood before Daniel, I knew that it does matter. My father and I loved each other. Yet, I always regretted never hearing him put his feelings into words and never having the memory of that moment. Now, I could feel my palms sweat and my throat tighten. Why is it so hard to tell a son something from the heart? My mouth turned dry, and I knew I would be able to get out only a few words clearly.

"Daniel," I said, "if I could have picked, I would have picked you."

That's all I could say. I wasn't sure he understood what I meant. Then he came toward me and threw his arms around me. For a moment, the world and all its people vanished, and there was just Daniel and me in our home by the sea. wow power leveling,

He was saying something, but my eyes misted over, and I couldn't understand what he was saying. All I was aware of was the stubble on his chin as his face pressed against mine. And then, the moment ended. I went to work, and Daniel left a few hours later with his girlfriend.

That was seven weeks ago, and I think about him when I walk along the beach on weekends. Thousands of miles away, somewhere out past the ocean waves breaking on the deserted shore, he might be scurrying across Boulevard Saint Germain, strolling through a musty hallway of the Louvre, bending an elbow in a Left Bank caf .

What I had said to Daniel was clumsy and trite. It was nothing. And yet, it was everything.

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