

Hello, Mom

I wanted to write you a letter in an attempt to communicate with the person who first showed me what love is and who I dearly love back.

**What this letter is not:** A attack on your character, a criticism of your mothering, attempts to make you feel guilty, a demand that you change, an attempt to be your therapist or psychoanalyze you, or an attempt to belittle or outsmart you. I am guessing you may feel some of these things, and that's okay. All I ask is that you listen to what I have to say. But what you decide to do with this letter is up to you, even if it is nothing but listening. I'll respect that.

**What this letter is:** An attempt to make meaning out of my life experiences and share that meaning with someone I care for deeply. I am not asking for solutions, pity, or concurrence. I only wish for you to see me and acknowledge that this is how I make sense of things.

I genuinely believe in the fact that life is hard. It is not just hard for the unfortunate but for everyone. The struggle is built into the human condition, for we all fall short of the glory of God. I believe the healthiest way to deal with this fact of life is to make meaning.

Meaning is what helps me endure the inevitable hardships of life. It is the lifeboat in rough waters. After 30 years, this vessel of mine needs to be repaired and renovated. The waves have caused rusting, and the bilge has begun to erode. I can point the bow away from the approaching storms, but this maneuver neither slows them down nor decreases their magnitude. I am like a sailor who must reconstruct his ship on the open sea but can never start afresh from the bottom. Nevertheless, work must be done, or I will soon be treading water.

Yea, it's that kind of letter.

After over a year in therapy, I have noticed a pattern in how I interact with others. I try nonstop to paint a pretty picture in the way I present myself. I am very concerned with how others think of me and try my hardest to appear well put together. I act as if showing flaws is weak and go to extreme lengths to protect that stainless image. Unfortunately, that grand portrayal is a facade, and its upkeep is unrealistic. My life hasn't been all merriment and bliss. I have caused my fair share of pain to those around me. I have been hurt by the ones I love. I hit road bumps and made many mistakes. At times I betrayed myself in attempts to keep it all together. This fact needs to be acknowledged in order to reclaim myself, my whole self, scrapes and bruises, flaws and shortcomings, and all the other aspects of self that I have *disowned*.

**“We can choose to be perfect and admired or to be real and loved.” – Glennon Doyle**

When I went to treatment for my drug addiction, I remember my therapist constantly challenging me in our sessions. “You are refusing to see how anxiety relates to your substance abuse”, “It doesn't seem like your childhood was as great as you say,” and “You said you have good relationships with your family members, but there is evidence to the contrary”. I remember how pissed off this would make me. I believed she was so wrong, so I *dismissed* her as incompetent. I thought, “therapists make a big deal out of everything”, “everyone has some anxiety and family troubles. It's not worth talking about”, and “what an idiot, she thinks she knows me better than I do myself”. So I *minimized* these issues and *devalued* her as a therapist. I *disengaged* from any uncomfortable feelings brought up when talking about these things. I often said, “Yea, my sisters picked on me, whose siblings didn't”, “I'm sure my parent's divorce affected me somehow, but that's in the past”, “I was addicted to heroin for a year, but it was just a phase, I grew out of it”. These are all true thoughts or things I have said.

I unconsciously *downplayed* and emotionally *disconnected* from these memories. I shut down these conversations before I could even feel anything arise from them. The truth is, most brothers don't get so angry with their siblings that they hit them with pool sticks, and no one turns to heroin because they learned to handle stress adequately.

As a consequence of habitually using these *avoidance* strategies, I failed to realize the gravity of these situations. And once I emotionally *deflated* them, I could no longer take credit for overcoming them. **When I *minimize my hardships*, I can not appreciate the grit and perseverance that I show.**

Consequently, I rob myself of a chance to build self-worth and fail to make meaning out of my experiences; I inhibit growth. Additionally, this leaves the shame/hurt unaddressed, and all I can do is expediently *circumvent* these feelings. The problem is, *ignoring* shame doesn't work, for it's too powerful. I can push it down for a while, but it slowly metastasizes. It waits until I no longer have the strength to keep it *repressed*. Inevitably life gets the best of me, and I find myself in a familiar battle, face-to-face with what scares me the most. I replay this game repeatedly, and I always lose; I'm sick of it.

I now see how these *avoidant* mental gymnastics and behaviors once served a purpose. When I *dismiss* others as "stupid" or "weak", I don't have to take what they say seriously, and I *avoid* having to look at myself. These defense mechanisms protect me from the pain of realizing my flaws and mistakes. They help me *evade* my shame. When I *devalue* others, it lessens the impact of their rejection. I do this in all my relationships to keep the stakes low. I obsessively look for faults in others and only contribute a shallow version of myself. I quietly develop an escape plan, and If I experience rejection, I can point to their weaknesses and blame them. My hesitation to authentically involve myself with others makes it hard to form genuine connections. Over the years, I made great strides in improving this. However, these tendencies often appear again when I interact with our family.

When I attempt to involve family members in my meaning-making process, It feels like I am going against the grain. I often get confronted with “why are you asking these questions/stop digging up the past”, “you’re being weird”, hostile/defensive/*dismissive* attitudes, and, once again, *avoidance*. It’s like walking on eggshells. It’s as if there are unspoken rules about what is allowed to be discussed. Somehow I feel like a pest just for asking my family about my childhood. And big emotions are definitely not allowed. I do my fair share to contribute to this. I remember a stretch of about four Christmases where they ended in (middle sister) sobbing. I recall calling her crazy and guilt-tripping her about how she always ruins the holidays. The message I sent was, “stop that, you’re dysfunctional, and you’re making everyone uncomfortable”. I still don’t even know why she was crying; I didn’t bother to hear her out. The problem is that I never developed a broad window of emotional tolerance. Big feelings made me uneasy, and I used *disregard* to decrease (middle sister’s) emotional temperature. I have found that if this strategy doesn’t work, I then turn to *withdraw*.

This dynamic starts when I see someone expressing their distress. The emotional intensity makes me alarmed and anxious. I then use *dismissive* tactics, such as gaslighting, to make that person stop expressing their feelings. Unfortunately, this never helps the person regulate their emotions. Instead, they just feel *invalidated*. As a result, the processing of emotions is halted, rejection is threatened, and the person is pigeonholed into *avoidance* and *repression*. These types of affect regulation are their only safe options left. This script exemplifies how maladaptive family dynamics and dysfunctional communication cycles stay fueled and perpetuate, even from generation to generation. I no longer wish to participate in the continuation of this sequence.

I notice these patterns when I reflect on our relationship in high school. How many times did my arrogance get the best of me? How many times did I refuse to see what was right in front of me because I knew better than you? How many times did I call you stupid and *dismiss* you? “Stop nagging me! You always do this”. I remember we once had such an intense fight about me using drugs that I later found you on the couch crying while reading the Bible. I had this twisted pride

about it. I remember when I acted out in high school, teachers would ask, “how does your mother handle you?”. I would smugly respond, “She just cries and reads the Bible”. How did I get to be so awful? How could a son be so cold?

I wonder if you can relate to any of this? Or am I just being pedantic and making a big deal out of things? You once told me, “all men hold in their emotions”. Well, if all men acted as I did when younger, I have no interest in identifying with that definition.

I notice the same pattern in my relationship with (college girlfriend). I vividly remember thinking, “I’m not going to marry her, she just isn’t good enough,” despite staying with her for over two years and being an emotional wreck when she finally dumped me. I remember thinking it was a hassle to communicate with her throughout the day and would *invalidate* her feelings and tell her she was clingy when she protested. I once saw her eat a salad with ketchup and could not get past it, like it actually made me think less of her. The biggest fight we ever had was over who was “smarter”. Guess who started it. I noticed I would start fights and then shut down. If she tried to bring up unresolved issues, I would *withdraw* as punishment. At one point in our relationship, I ignored her for a week without saying one word to her. These behaviors served a purpose. They protected my ego from the rejection I was so terrified of. They kept her at arm’s length and stopped me from ever having to rely on her.

When I was younger, I did not have the emotional maturity to handle rejection at face value. I couldn’t look past my arrogance and see my faults. But I am getting older, and these behaviors no longer serve me. They are relics of the past, a useless system that always results in me shooting myself in the foot. They act as a self-fulfilling prophecy. In *withdrawing* from all conflict in the present, I cement it into the future. In obsessively trying to prepare for rejection, I ensure it by *holding back* and only offering the parts of me that I deem worthy. Additionally, these *devaluing, dismissing, and avoidance* behaviors have skewed the lens through which I view the world. **As a**

**result, I only see the worm and fail to appreciate the apple.** This mindset has to change for me to have successful relationships or a healthy marriage.

I'm done going through life, picking and choosing the parts of me that are applaudable and discarding the rest. Doing this has neglected the deepest parts of me and left me with a feeling of shame and inauthenticity. This has to change in order for me to live a whole and happy life.

**“Our sense of belonging can never be greater than our level of self-acceptance” –  
Brene Brown.**

Where did I learn that showing vulnerability and emotion was weak? Why do I value independence so much that I turned to drugs before asking others for help? Why can't I come to rely on the people that I love the most and instead keep everyone at a safe distance? What type of person *denigrates* their own flesh and blood? Why do I get so uncomfortable when intimacy starts to grow that I *sever* it before it can flourish? These are the questions that I set out to answer.

But where do I start? How deep does the motif go? How far back did I contract this ailment? Last semester I took a theories class, and I often tried to fit my life into each personality framework taught. During one exercise, my professor asked us to share our very earliest memories with him and the class; I shared two. The first was at (daycare). I remember trying to color in a picture and getting so frustrated at coloring outside the lines that I ripped the whole drawing to shreds. The second was at (preschool), and it was about when I kicked my teacher because she took me out of the toy car I was driving. My professor's insight was, “Maybe you believe you need to act out to get attention”. It amazes me how accurate this is. Even when I was a toddler, you could see the seeds that would soon deform into the maladaptive interpersonal system I have today. These instances are the precursors to an *insecure attachment style*.

That class motivated me to start a journal and write down old memories. First came the ugly recollections. I quickly realized that I had never shared them with anyone. Not my family, not my ex-girlfriends, not even my best friends. I would bring them up in therapy without any emotion attached or think privately about them as I journaled. Doing this reactivated them, and the feelings had to be processed. I want to share them with you because I have learned that *hiding* from the past provides fodder for shame. I am not asking for your mark of approval or validation as a historian. All I ask is for you to have an open heart and listen to my pain.

My first unpleasant collision with the past involved two old memories in the (2<sup>nd</sup> childhood house). I first developed my sleep, anxiety, and depression issues in this house. I'm sure you had many legitimate reasons for the move, but I remember being sad that I could no longer walk to Dad's house. Of course, memories this far back are fragmented, but we all remember how scared I was of the dark.

Sometimes (middle sister) would let me sleep in her bed. Other times you'd let me sleep with you or on your floor. But that must not have always been the case. I also remember pacing outside your door for hours in the dark and trying to keep my sobbing quiet enough so I wouldn't wake you up. I vividly recall the frustration as I tried to find the strength to knock on your door but was too scared of how you might react. I did not want to feel the shame elicited by the possible rejection of my requests to sleep in your room. Sometimes I would work myself up enough that I found the strength to burst in frantically. It must have taken this much of an outcry to get your attention. Other times I would get so close to knocking, but the fear of you *dismissing* me won, so I would just lay there. There were a few steps outside your bedroom that I got to know quite well. Shame is commanding; It's powerful enough to make a child rather sleep with the monsters under his bed.

But all children go through something like this. Right? Everyone was scared of the dark at some point. Part of growing up is learning to sleep on your own, and that experience was probably

needed to toughen me up. I used to think that, but again, It's just *minimizing*. In reality, most children don't think twice when they are that terrified; **they just open the door.**

Another memory from that house sticks in my mind like tar. I remember writing a note titled something like "Why I don't want to live anymore". I left it open on my computer, hoping someone would walk by and see it. It was an immature way to ask for attention. I remember the shame felt when I walked back into my room. You, (older and middle sister) were gathered around my computer and just looked at me and awkwardly snickered. I now understand; the laughing was how you all dealt with uneasy and anxious feelings. But back then, I learned that cries for help would be weaponized against me. The message was "independence is the only way to survive, and vulnerability is pathetic".

What's a child supposed to do in a situation like that? The only way I knew how to get the attention I desperately needed was to blow my emotions up so big that they demanded recognition. But that strategy backfired. My outcries got shoved back into my face. Shame is an "intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging". I couldn't find a better way to describe how I felt that day. Over the years, I quickly learned that a *divorce* from my emotions was the only safe option.

In the 6th grade, my teachers sat me down and talked to me about depression. I remember how uncomfortable the conversation was for me. Luckily, (my teacher) gave me an out. She said, "you just don't like school, do you, (Me)?". Afterward, I remember telling (childhood best friend), "I can't believe they think I'm depressed. Isn't that so funny?". The irony is apparent now. Even as a twelve-year-old, I was unsure how to handle genuine concern from others, so I *mocked* it.

I wonder if you notice the desire to *minimize, dismiss, or devalue* anything I am saying. Do I seem pathetic? Does this make you uneasy and anxious? Or does it hurt so much to hear this that you want to push it *away* and *shame* me for bringing it up?



In my teen years, I remember the lengths you would go to catch me in my transgressions. Back then, I had a chat room I used to talk to my friends when I was grounded from my Xbox. You went through the entire website and found a message where I called you a “bitch”. You printed out a screenshot and gave it to me in tears, saying, “how could you talk about your mother like that?”. What drove you to invade my private conversations? Was it the fear of my rejection? Did your own insecurities produce in me what you dreaded most?

Another time, I remember you and (middle sister) went through my room and found a letter I wrote to (highschool girlfriend). You both read the letter and discovered I had sex with her, and I was consequently shamed. I remember constantly feeling like it was me versus you all. These types of things happened over and over. You once searched my room and found pills in my wallet. You waited for the perfect moment to confront me. During the argument, I stubbornly refused to admit to my drug use. You played along until I dug in deep, and then you opened your hand to show me the pills.

Do you see the pattern? Can you see how I would feel violated and, in turn, distrust my own family? The ends always justified the means, and shame was used to control.

I want to share one more memory from high school that I have brought up before. I’m sure you can recall how I often came to you in tears after (girlfriend) broke up with me in high school. I remember laying on the floor in the computer room sobbing in your presence. At some point, you decided that you had enough. You told me, “we are not doing this anymore. Get up!”. Do you see the thread here? How could a mother be so cold? That was my first love, my first taste of heartache. Your *dismissiveness* and *invalidation* made me feel like something was wrong with me. But, in reality, the only thing I did wrong was trust you with my pain. All I needed from you was validation and emotional attunement. For you to feel my fractured heart with me, but you couldn’t handle that. And when you couldn’t fix my pain, you got frustrated and lashed out.

A while back, I remember you telling me how (maternal grandfather) told you and (aunt) to stop crying at (maternal grandmother) funeral. I asked you how a father could be so cold. "He's always been like this," you said, "it's the family curse,". (Grandfather) denied the part of him that loved his wife at that funeral. He cut off his emotions and deemed them unworthy. In doing so, he disabled any capacity for empathy. Leaving him with nothing left but scorn for his daughters. As a result, he could not attune to the grief you both felt. He *dismissed* your feelings because he couldn't handle the pain. I can't image the invalidation and hurt you must have felt, and I am genuinely heartbroken for you. Any man who does not cry at his wife's funeral has already beaten her to the grave. For he refused to embrace the risk that is love and, instead, chose to house his heart in a cold dark cell. That man denied his invitation to live a fully integrated life long ago. You were right mom; this is a family curse, passed down from generation to generation.

It was tempting for me to label these recollections as dramatic and sweep them back into the abyss. I cringed while reading the words out loud and felt my nervous system squirm as I imagined you reading this. Will she laugh at me? Will she tell my sisters about this? I can hear you saying, "(Me) is losing it. Look at this letter he wrote me", "What is wrong with him".

I understand now; this is my conditioning. It's so deeply dug into my personality that my physical body fights against me as I put these words to paper. How could I come to trust anyone if I can't trust the person who brought me into this world with the truest contents of my suffering? If I am so ashamed of the inner workings of my mind that I can't show them to my own mother, **maybe the deepest parts of me are not worthy of anyone.** These are the traces of shame interwoven throughout my thoughts.

Why do I notice this fear arise in me as I write this? Why do I automatically replay this imagined reaction of yours in my head? How did this shame get implanted into my psyche? Why am I ambivalently stuck between deciding if this expression of feeling is authentic or invalid? My emotions are like an abused dog, too afraid to bite the hand that feeds despite the primal urge.

Many bad days were listed in my journal, but one always glares at me. I would rather cut my wrists than go back and live one hour of that day. I was still in disarray over (college girlfriend), and the shame of my addiction was amassing. Every morning, when I woke, I could feel the depression seep back into my awareness. Sleep was the only respite in that hell of a world. I hadn't been right in months. I felt so alone and hopeless that all I could do was blot out my consciousness any chance I could. I was smoking Fentanyl every day. Part of me knew I was playing Russian roulette with every hit and even welcomed that deadly game. My last ditch effort at relieving the suffering was a call to you. I begged you for help. I pleaded for you to bear part of my burden. An impossible request, I know. You asked me if I wanted to go to a psychiatric hospital before I hung up the phone.

Mom, I can't say I have no resentment toward you, but I can say I love you despite it. I understand that life is hard, and sometimes, it all comes crashing down at once. And it continues to throw its punches; another storm is always on the horizon. In the past, I denied the forecast and waited for the shipwreck. But this vessel can only lose so many battles; I'm starting to learn how to ask for a lifeline, and that meaning makes for better fuel than *avoidance*.

As a counselor, I learned that **when you refuse to feel it all, you risk missing it all**. I wrote this letter to help me make meaning out of my past. To understand the hand I was dealt in this life. This process is necessary in order to integrate the neglected parts of me into a whole self. I had to feel it all, including resentment, anger, and pain, but that's only half the story. **When you refuse to dig up the past, the diamonds in the rough stay buried and forgotten, deep under the ground, where the light will never get the chance to dance in their magnificence.**

**"Let us endure hardship to be grateful for the plenty. We are given pain to be astounded by joy. We did not ask for this room or this music, but because we are here, let us dance" - Stephen King.**

While journaling, I also stumbled upon forgotten memories that I will cherish forever. I remember getting growing pains in the middle of the night when I was little. You would wrap my legs in hot towels and tuck me in tight. You would return in the middle of the night and take the towels off once they got cold, so I didn't have to get up. When I got pneumonia, you were there with a chicken noodle soup on a bed tray every time my fever broke. You took care of us well.

I also remembered the effort you made to make your children happy. Back then, I loved maps with an X marking the spot on them. I drew all types of maps for fun and loved the idea of buried treasure. You put so much into making my birthday pirate-themed that year and even dressed up as a pirate yourself. Birthdays meant so much to me back then.

I remember you would often hold my hand as a child. We would go back and forth... \*squeeze\*-I-\*squeeze\*-**love**-\*squeeze\*-\*you. I remember I used to hold your and Dad's hand at the same time while walking... 1-2-3-SWING. I loved that game so much. I remember you reading Good Night Moon and The Kissing Hand before bed. You would kiss the palm of my hand, close it, and press it on my cheek. Thinking about these memories makes me feel loved and whole. I will never forget them again. I'll keep them safe next to my heart. One day, when I have children, I will fondly pass on these expressions of love in *hopes* that they live on.

**"Hope is a good thing, maybe the best of things, and no good thing ever dies." – Andy Dufresne.**

Mom, thank you for showing me what love is and for always taking care of me. You weren't perfect, but that doesn't make me love you any less, and I will always love you despite your faults or past mistakes. One day, when my children come to me with their pain, I *hope* I won't try and fix it but instead have the strength to tolerate and attune to their emotions. I'll remember that when a person is hurting, the best thing I can do is sit in that emotion with them and feel it too. As a father, I

will make many mistakes, and my shortcomings will show. I can only *pray* that my children love me despite those flaws and, in turn, learn to do a little bit better when they are parents. This generational growth is only possible if I confront the past, process it, and grow from those experiences. I'm not there yet, but I'm working on it.

**"Grace means that all your mistakes now serve a purpose instead of serving shame." –**

**Brene Brown**

After you read this, my *wish* is that it helps you look at the past for what it is. To see the whole picture, the tragedy, and the beauty. I *hope* you find whatever it is that you need to confront your pain and come to see that the mother underneath is loved so dearly. If there is truly evil in this world, its most veracious form is shame, for it diminishes the capacity for love. Including self-love, as it blinds us from the goodness in ourselves.

But there is always *hope*, as I have *faith* that there is good in this world.

**"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness. Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me." – 2 Corinthians 12:9**

I love you so much and am proud to call you mom.

Your only son, (Me)

