

A Love Letter to My Dad
Jill Kuhn, Ph.D.

“If there ever comes a day when we can’t be together, keep me in your heart. I’ll stay there forever.”-Winnie the Pooh

I have been a bit off my game over this last month. Some days are fine, some come with tears and others are mixed. My dad was diagnosed with cancer! I know most people have a loved one who has had cancer, is surviving cancer or has not survived cancer. Although I have come to love people who are living with cancer and worked with clients with cancer, this is my first up close and very personal experience with it.

Four years ago my dad and I celebrated our 80th and 40th birthday, respectively. I am fortunate that in spite of having “older” parents, they are healthy and for the most part, are thriving. My dad has longevity in his family tree. Both his parents lived into their mid-90’s and I enjoyed a long relationship with them. I’m banking on these genes to keep my dad with me for a while longer. This cancer throws a potential wrench into my plans, though, and we do not yet know what my dad’s future holds. We remain hopeful. I knew, of course, that there would come a day when I would be without my parents, but usually I swat away my thoughts of losing them. Both my parents and I have continued to love one another through the ups and downs of our relationship and stages in life and have become good friends. We are open about our love for one another and have worked to understand one another better. I do not want to say good-bye, but I will not have regrets or have left any words unspoken. I hope to get a lot more “I love you’s” in and to be able to know that they are a phone call away to talk about the big and little things in life for a lot longer to come.

My parents adopted me when I was a week old. My dad regularly bathed, changed and fed me. He spent every other night in the nursery (and when two more siblings came in quick succession) and got up with fussy or hungry babies. Men of today could take a lesson from him. Although he worked long hours as a physician he made his children a priority. As we got older, he spent a lot time with us on weekends, mainly because he wanted to, but also to give my mom a break. He let us “help” him with yard work. He taught us to play tennis and took us swimming and let us beat him at races. He regularly took us to the G-rated movie nights at our school. The movie did nothing for him, so he sat and read a book while we socialized. He was a teacher in my church classes when I was a pre-teen/early teen. I was very proud that he was a teacher, even though I think he worried that I might be embarrassed by him. In fact, he had a nice touch of making me look good with my peers by sharing positive things about me, but never over shared. At home, he was always open to my questions about religion. Unlike many of my peers, I could ask whatever was on my mind. My dad held my questions with respect and shared how he came to understand the answers for himself. He never pushed me to resolve the doubts and curiosities; he just gave me a safe place to explore them. As we got older, my dad would often tell us he had seen a bumper sticker that read, “Have your hugged your

kid today?" and would hug us all. There must have been a lot of those in the 70's and 80's!

My dad showed up, over and over. He showed up even when I did not appreciate it or did, but didn't know how to tell him. As I got older there were times we did not understand one another. He was still there. His love for me never wavered. He continues to show up for my daughters in the most magnificent and loving of ways. Ways they don't fully see, but many of which they look forward to during our visits to my childhood home. Incredibly, part of this is that he (nor my mom) has not once commented, corrected or criticized my parenting, even though I'm sure there have been many times when they could have been right about saying something.

My dad and I don't agree on our politics and long ago agreed to not discuss these differences. Most magnificently and graciously, the day after the election, I called to talk to him (not even thinking about Obama's re-election) and he said, "Are you feeling good today?" I thought he was just asking about me, until he said, "Because Obama won." He didn't protest, express his disappointment or say a myriad of other things he could have said. He just let me know that he knew I was feeling good. What a tremendous man of character, who in the midst of his brand new diagnosis acknowledged something that made me happy, even though he did not feel the same.

As I write this, my dad has finished his first chemotherapy treatment. I hate that this will be so much a part of his life in the months to come. It is hard that I live 1,100 miles away, but I also know that I can support and love my dad from afar and can get to him in a few hours if needed. Today we texted each other during part of his chemotherapy infusion. I am grateful he is letting me be a part of this. I dreamed a couple of nights ago that I was also diagnosed with the same cancer my dad has. I've been thinking and reading about it every day, so it's not surprising that my dream took this form. I shared my dream with my dad, to let him know how much he has been on my mind, and he rightfully said, "Yours was a dream, mine isn't."

My dad is an oncologist! It seems there should be some joke about what the psychologist said to the oncologist or vice versa. Right now I have no punch line. My dad has spent decades immersed in the research, treatment and realities of cancer. He knows what he has and what treatment is indicated. He knows the 5-year survival statistics. Right now he has cancer and is not the oncologist, and I am the concerned daughter, not a psychologist. I have talked with my dad regularly but wanted to be sure to avoid platitudes, sensitively send love from afar, while fully recognizing that this is my dad's very private journey and battle. I believe I have done well with these things, when they have involved clients or friends, but my dad is not my client, nor I his therapist. We are a father and daughter who love one another dearly. So, I did my research and found a wonderful book to start with, "Help Me Live: 20 Things People with Cancer Want you to Know (by Lori Hope, 2005, 2011)." I have been trying to listen carefully and follow his lead as he shares his thoughts, observations and walks strongly into this. He's my dad after all, the only one I've got!

Note: The photo is of Jill as an infant with her dad.