

A Pandemic Letter to My 17-Year-Old Son by Phyllis Cole-Dai

Son Nathan exploring the headwaters of the Mississippi River at Itasca State Park, MN, this summer.

Starting when you were just a toddler, you'd crawl into my lap to play a game. I'd lay hands on each part of your body, naming it aloud. We'd begin with the "grass" of hair on your head and slowly work our way down to your "piggy" toes. You soon learned even the regions of your brain, the organs in your torso, and your seven chakras.

Our game wasn't just about naming and knowledge, though. Even more, it was about attention and loving touch. You craved the physical sensations as my hands tenderly pressed and poked, tickled and caressed in a safe, predictable way. My touching made you laugh, but it also calmed and comforted you. When you were sleepy, you asked for "body parts." When you were sad, "body parts." When you had a bad cold, "body parts." At least once a day, "body parts."

Every round of "body parts" took a half-hour or more. To be honest, I sometimes didn't want to play when you did, especially when tired. But our time together was too precious, too fleeting, ever to turn you down. When you finally outgrew my lap, and our game ended, how I missed that intimate ritual! We had to invent new ones.

Now you're nearly eighteen, headed into your senior year. After carefully researching and weighing the options available in our school district this fall, you'd settled on a hybrid of online and in-person classes (including Human Anatomy). But the school has just informed you that it won't be offering any of your courses virtually. You have no choice but to attend in person and assume the risks.

You feel betrayed by the process. So do I.

Yesterday we sat together on the couch, discussing this and other grown-up stuff. Part of you is a man already; another part, you told me, "isn't ready for adulthood, and doesn't want to be." Part of you wants to tell me everything; another wants to hide. Part of you doesn't understand how I can be "so happy all the time"—how I can sing and joke in the middle of a pandemic, with the country falling apart, two sick parents at a far distance, and a never-shrinking pile of projects. Meanwhile, another part of you is trying like mad to "protect" me from anything that might cause me unhappiness. These are the "parts" we're touching now, the tender game we play.

I want you to know that I still see the boy in you. As your mother, I'll always still see the

boy, no matter how old you get. But I also see—and believe in—the beautiful man you're growing into, even when you can't.

I want you to know that whenever you have something to say, I'll be here to listen, and you never need to hide anything from me because you're afraid or ashamed. But I also don't expect you to tell me everything. You have a right to privacy. You get to decide which of your soul's doors to invite me through. I should warn you, though, I might sometimes knock on a closed door, and if you don't answer, I might plop down on the floor and wait. (Don't be surprised if I start singing.)

I want you to know that, despite what you think, I'm not happy all the time; that I sometimes sing or joke because I'm unhappy. These things help me cope, like having a good cry, or taking a long walk, or venting to someone I trust. To me, life isn't about being happy. It's about making my peace with the fact that life, while amazing, is hard. (I'm still working on that.)

I want you to know that you don't need to protect me, though I love your dear heart for wanting to. I'm not made of glass. I'm suede—soft leather, but tough. My love for you is bigger than any pain I could ever suffer because of you.

Here's my hope: Wherever you go, whenever you're anxious or angry, afraid or lonely, you might remember sitting on my lap as a little guy. Feel my hand resting lightly on the crown of your head. Over your heart. On your shoulder. And remember in that moment that wherever I am, and whatever else I'm doing, I'm remembering you.