

Date: Fri, 19 Jan 2001 09:24:49 EST
From: Yongwoo@aol.com
To: kchoi@harvard.edu
Subject: From Dad

Hi Katie,
I am writing this to say I love you very much and I am proud of you.
I was brought up in a culture that saying these things is not so common.
I do not remember my parent saying these things, but I knew they love me.
Even though I left Korea long time ago, it is not easy to think American way.
I hope you will understand.
Dad.

To My Father

By Kattyn Chol

When my father was 18, he had just arrived in a new country. He was also a senior in high school, but his favorite subject was math, only because it was easiest for him. In fact, my dad couldn't speak English.

I can't think of anything beyond physical characteristics that I attributed to my Korean heritage until now. The following revelations represent an appreciation of the risks my father took in choosing to come to the US, how he had to adapt to a different culture. They communicate a greater understanding of my father's past, which has improved our communication today, by healing the miscommunications of my childhood. I never acknowledged that the world in which my dad's perspectives were shaped, in which his opinions of mankind were formulated, could possibly be responsible for conflicts we had as I was growing up. Through learning about my dad's past, I have a greater understanding of the Korean culture, I understand my dad really does love me and is very proud of me, and I have a greater respect — the respect he indeed deserves — for my father's struggles as what some might label a "one-point-five generation Korean American."

My father had a unique experience in arriving in America in 1971. At the time, he was the only immigrant in his high school in Cleveland, Ohio. This meant there were no special "exchange student" programs, no real interest in diversity within the school system, and none of the extra efforts to learn about other cultures as well as share the American culture to foreigners. All the effects of increasing globalization and acceptance of a diverse realm of beliefs, cultures, and ideologies we now so readily grasp — these were forged by the pioneers of our race.

I've learned these things ...

1. My dad doesn't give me advice because he doesn't trust me.

I used to think my dad enjoyed hounding me about every aspect of my life, from playing the piano to running for class president. I thought he was just like any other parent who tried to live his life through his kids, or maybe he was just a control freak who wanted to plan and execute every part of his children's lives. But my dad advises me because he strongly regrets there being no one to advise him at a critical age. He tells me often, he only wishes someone would have guided him, if only he could have had that luxury. No one even told him he had to take the SAT's once spring rolled around senior year. Could I convince myself he should've taken the initiative to find out? For me, it was hard enough taking care of the necessary steps to college without adjusting to life in a new country.

2. My dad isn't pessimistic.

My dad always told me the only people who really cared about me, whom I could completely trust, were my parents. He warned me to not take encouraging words or even close friendships at face value. No matter what, your parents would always tell you the truth of the matter rather than tell you something you necessarily wanted to hear. When my father was a senior, his classmates told him the wrong directions to class. He couldn't afford to trust people in such an unfamiliar culture, where he was unable to discern things as simple as a joke.

3. My dad doesn't make excuses.

Sometimes I thought all the stories of my father's past were a reflection of how he failed to make the most of *today* and of the circumstances and challenges he faced. Rather, I thought he lingered on mistakes or the follies of chance. But I, after taking five years of Spanish, still can't speak fluently. And my Korean is shameful. My father arrived to America not only in a time when few others arrived, he also came at a critical, determining time period of life. He shares his past with me not as an excuse, but as the only way to understand him ... because his past is fundamental to his person, and speaks volumes about who he is today.

**"My dad is a great man ...
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understanding of where
he's coming from, I have
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despise."**

4. My dad has a lot of hope for me.

My dad often tells me that if he could survive college English at Case Western Reserve Academy (CWRU) then I could do anything. I used to think he didn't have too much faith in me because when I got in to Harvard, he warned me to choose classes carefully, to study hard but not let my ego make me stupid in taking a class that was way over my head. In fact, when I expressed interest in taking Korean freshman year, he told me it would be too difficult and that I should stick with Spanish. I thought all this was because he thought little of my intellect. But it was because, although he had struggled to socially and academically in a new country, I had been fortunate enough to stumble upon a great opportunity —one that he wanted to preserve and treat with great care and respect — one that was hardly open to him.

5. My dad is a great man.

My dad is a great man. Lately, we've been e-mailing each other, and when I call home, I'll chit chat with him a little before speaking with my mom. Because I have a greater understanding of where he's coming from, I have been able to appreciate all those things which I used to despise. His email, on the other page, brought me to tears.

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