

# Annie's Praise

*Your parents would be so proud of you!* Would they? My brother William, my sister, Sheila, and her husband, Ralph, had come to visit me for the day after I'd moved from Oakland, California to Ukiah, a town of 16,000 two hours north. The four of us had just finished enjoying a long and leisurely breakfast with our local friends, Annie and Steve. Our in-depth conversation spanned many topics, from usage at Ukiah's tiny airport, to Bay Area property values, to Donald Trump's looming impeachment. Punctuated by lively declarations of profound truth, our discourse around forkfuls of eggs and waffles reaffirmed shared values despite widely disparate life experiences.

Our friend Annie heaped our parents' pride upon my siblings and me, amazed that the three of us had not only remained so close over our 60-plus years, but were compatible in our understanding of what's important in life. Her praise lingered long in my mind while I questioned its veracity.

Our mother and father were lifelong civil rights activists and accomplished African American professionals – Mommy, an attorney who was admitted to practice before the U.S. Supreme Court in 1959, and Dad, a pharmaceutical chemist and supervisor of the Chemistry Department Lab at Ohio State University for 43 years. My earliest memories of Dad include his insistence that we all pursue a good college education: a must for anyone wanting to outrun racial discrimination. By the time that Dad's instruction on how to succeed met my ears, Mommy had passed. She died when we were all very young, ages 6 to 10, and even after her passing and the ensuing financial problems that plagued us, Dad pressed his point about education. He persisted not only in word, but in deed: moving us to the best neighborhood he could afford to ensure we could attend good public schools; showing up unannounced to observe our classes; participating significantly in parent-teacher association meetings; pressing our school counselors to guide us into college prep classes; and encouraging us in every way possible to do our best.

Mommy's impression on our success went far beyond conveying the transformative value of education. Her sudden passing at the age of 41 was a trauma

that firmly settled for each of us the pure folly of material gain in whatever form; after losing her, only those opportunities that stirred our spirit held any deep appeal. It seems that on the morning Mommy left us, all manner of degrees, promotions, salaries and comfortable lifestyle lost luster. Though we each still knew that a quality education was important, we would never come to accept that any variety of game-playing or insincerity was worthy of our commitment or sacrifice. Mommy's passing deeply imbedded in us an intense desire to pursue truths that few institutions were able to exemplify. Our longing caused us to reject the lies that characterized even the most "benign" elements of career advancement; thus, any chance of obtaining the markings of traditional success eluded us.

I held Annie's post-breakfast compliment in purgatory while I could more fully consider whether Mommy and Dad would really be proud of the choices made and accomplishments attained by their children. Only one of us finished college with a bachelor's degree, and only one currently owns property. None of us has ever made more than a livable salary nor traveled far beyond the confines of North America. We're critical thinkers, we're compassionate, we have high integrity and we're authentic -- *but would our parents also need society's blessing of education and income status to feel genuinely proud of us?*

Dad was born in 1910 and Mommy in 1922, so educational and financial achievement was their worthy ambition. But through their desire to fully integrate into American society, they adopted a prescription for success that is steeped in a narrow, Western definition of "education" that essentially excludes imagination, intuition, or inspiration -- all of which can produce moments of extreme clarity or evoke a life passion. This limited definition of education means that obtaining major academic and career accomplishment -- even without a deep sense of satisfaction -- still qualifies as success.

Despite Dad's near constant advice and excellent example, our early childhood trauma of losing Mommy diverted our attention. We certainly acknowledged in our minds the importance of a college education, but far more important to us was achieving a sense of inner peace; we each needed to fill the gaping hole of Mommy's absence. I'm sure this need was, to some extent, met by the Bible lessons we learned at home

and in Sunday School. Surely, Dad didn't realize how deeply we would all be impacted by his reading and then discussing with us Bible passages about David and Goliath; Daniel in the lion's den; Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego; the good Samaritan; and the sermon on the mount. Neither Dad nor any of us could have known that the truths of these passages would give us an anchor that the pursuit of traditional success simply could not. This is not to say that one cannot be spiritual and highly successful, but for us, being true to our inner spirit was how we defined success.

Our life paths were quite varied -- Sheila was drawn to ministry and fine arts; William's passions were playing music, political activism and growing cannabis; my heart leapt at writing poetry. We weren't seeking knowledge, but rather truth and understanding. Of course, while pursuing our passions we worked demanding jobs -- Sheila and I in advanced administrative support roles, and William as a journeyman carpenter and building inspector. These jobs supported us while we gave the best of our lives to the call of our inner spirit.

And this is what Annie must have seen when she proclaimed our parents' pride in us: our devotion to seek truth and understanding, our insistence on living authentically, and our willingness to sacrifice all the "trappings" of success in order to be true to ourselves. As for whether our parents would be genuinely proud of their three children -- who never achieved notable success by society's standards -- I have decided to receive Annie's praise as the pronouncement of Mommy and Dad's highest approval.

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