

Disappoint Your Parents;

It's For Your Own Good

by Rowan Tackitt

I made a kid cry yesterday.

I asked him, “What do you like most about yourself?” and he looked shellshocked. He couldn’t think of anything.

I quickly made him a worksheet in four parts, but didn’t let him see them all at the same time. Instead, I gave him the first page:

How would you describe yourself?

Pretend you’re a character in a story you’re writing/reading or a game you’re playing

The first page: How would you describe yourself?

He only wrote down negative words, such as “lazy” and “stupid.” I didn’t object, but handed him the next page:

Who taught you to think of yourself that way?

When? Why? What happened or is happening?

The second page: Who taught you to think of yourself that way?

He asked for clarification before writing “myself” and “my parents,” describing frequent fights between them that left him feeling dejected. He was already choking up when I handed him the final page, a reiteration of the original question:

What are your favorite parts of yourself?

Write 5 kind statements about yourself. Consider what your loved ones would say.

The third page: What are your favorite parts of yourself?

Tears silently streamed down his face for 30 minutes. Finally, he wrote five variations of “I get good grades” and “I make my parents happy.”

When I flipped the paper over and asked for something that *doesn't* involve other people, he spent another 30 minutes writing and erasing and crying before handing me a sheet that simply said “my curiosity.”

I work with teens—primarily, high school juniors preparing for college. On paper, my job is to help them study for tests and write their college application essays. In practice, I’m a part-time therapist. The kids are not alright. Frankly, neither are a lot of the adults I meet; who do you think the kids are learning from?

My kids are lovely, but they’re all buckling under the weight of parental expectations. They’re in multiple AP classes, tutoring, summer school, driver’s ed, sports, speech and debate... the list goes on. Many get only 2-3 hours of sleep a night, along with multiple all-nighters when they inevitably fall behind on their studies. They all have a list of 5-20 Ivy League and [Ivy Plus](#) schools they’re applying to—even the kids who have no interest or chance of getting into any of them.¹ Their entire worth is centered around academic success, real or imagined, and they do everything they can to maintain that worth—a struggle I know many still face in adulthood. The bindings of family can be tight.

I’m tired of watching teenagers—who *should* be going through their rebellious phases—let their parents dictate their lives, their interests, and their value as human beings, but they don’t know any better because they don’t have good role models. It is endlessly frustrating, watching grown adults sacrifice their autonomy and moral values in the name of family—in the name of not rocking the boat, even as a mutiny is underway. We all know at least one person (you may even *be* that person) who lets their family mistreat them, just because “they’re blood.”² But if you weren’t related, would your family be your *friends*? And would their friendship be worth the sacrifices they require?

I've always been an advocate for doing whatever you want, so long as it doesn't harm others, but that can be hard when you feel limited by the watchful gaze of family. I will admit, I'm in a unique position in that I don't care—and never have cared—about appealing to my parents. My parents are Neo-Nazis; they keep a Trump bobblehead on their dresser and an AR-15 next to their bed. In short, I've never had any reason to respect their opinions, especially since my dad raised me to question authority and think critically (ironic, right?).

As the eldest, my parents always had high expectations for me. I freed myself by disappointing them. I moved out at 18, got a liberal arts degree they would scoff at, and went to the University of Chicago to write about vampires. I transitioned, and am in love with a nonbinary musician who painted "PUNCH FASCISTS" on their battle jacket. My cats and I have a studio apartment in Chicago (although only one of us pays rent). And after years of hard work, I don't hate myself anymore. I don't describe myself as "lazy" and "stupid" like my parents did, and I know that I'm more than what I can do for other people.

I don't talk to my parents anymore because they couldn't unlearn their hatred. I know they consider me a failure; I couldn't be happier

The kid I made cry left with a new notebook and a new homework assignment: write down at least one nice thing about yourself every day. I know he'll struggle with this, but healing and growth are rarely comfortable. Freedom—physically or mentally—is never achieved without struggle. And if your parents truly love you, they'll continue to, even if they don't agree with your choices.

1 No shade! There's nothing wrong with not getting into a top school. These kids don't have less value just because they aren't academic geniuses. Hell, that might be a good thing.

2 I'm reminded of a line from Sparkbird's "November": *Not only is it thicker, blood is stickier than water.* You either want it to stick around, or it's a bitch to clean off.