

PERSONAL ESSAY

When the apple clings to the tree

I built my identity around my parents. Honestly, it worked out pretty well.

// BY ELSPETH YEH

“You are the perfect synthesis of your parents.”

It was an August mid-morning, one of the last lazy late summer days before I departed for my second year of college. The humidity had crept into the quaint, colonial bistro where I sat across the table from the woman who quite possibly knows my soul most intimately: my high school English teacher.

Sabrina’s eyes danced over the lip of her mug as she sipped her cappuccino and watched her words settle into my heart. The air was so thick I had to swallow before I could respond.

“That is the best compliment I’ve ever received.”

It is not revelatory for a child to take after their parents. We have the term “black sheep” to communicate the exception that proves the rule: progeny, by virtue of proximity and repeated interaction, almost invariably adopt attributes and tendencies from those who raise them.

So, hearing that I exhibit this similarity was not profound for its novelty. Rather, I realized in that moment that my entire life had been spent in pursuit of this perception. My worship of my parents had transformed into a teleological imperative to be as similar to them as possible. I felt that if I could emulate them in every way, I too could become a person who I believed truly made the world a better place.

The ethos of college is to amass the listless young adults struggling to self-actualize into one pseudo-reality and say: figure it out. Nobody knows who they are at nineteen, but it was not until this breakfast with Sabrina that I discovered my specific disorientation stemmed from the fact that the framework that had structured my childhood identity was one that no longer held up for a semi-independent adult.

Now that I don’t see my parents every day, it is increasingly harder to form myself perfectly into their image in the mirror every morning. Whispers of originality are beginning to seep through the cracks.

So I parse through my personality to find the parts of myself that are my parents that I took for granted and am terrified might begin to slip away.

The first phase of my imitation scheme was to appropriate their interests. Since my parents were necessarily models of successful 21st century adults, I decided that liking what they liked might guide me toward a comparable position.

My parents met singing together in their university’s glee club. Their love was born out of making music together, and they continue to sing in a professional vocal ensemble in the evenings after work. Growing up I would sit during concerts in the stiff wooden pews at the back of a church, mesmerized by their voices. I joined my elementary school choir the first year I was eligible.

For eight years of my life, singing in a traditional choir defined my identity. Between auditions, rehearsals, concerts, lessons and competitions, I cannot understate the amount of my life I dedicated to vocal performance. Yet my passion had a peculiar motivation. Whereas for so many making music is a method of self-expression, for me it was an exercise driven by the hope one day my voice would mature into my mother’s effortless soprano.

At times the ways they shaped me were much more deliberate. When Covid-19 kept me from

classes, my father enrolled me in a thorough education of film history, which he earnestly dubbed, “The Curriculum.” We watched a movie almost every night — or at least every week — for almost two years. Since the curriculum was my father’s original design, we began in 1984, the year when the films of his childhood started to hit the box office.

“The Curriculum” was not an education in movies, it was an education in my dad’s favorite movies, the ones he deemed seminal for

up for has had mixed results. It has both led me to the amazing, chaotic family of Yale Model UN and to muddy frat house yards.

For this reason, freedom is terrifying. With every new endeavor, I am no longer sure whether it will be to my benefit, since it has not been previously vetted by my parents. Where I can, I still cling onto those things they gave me: Marvel comics, true crime documentaries, live theater, and Billy Joel. This time, however, making the conscious decision that yes,

growing up: “polite, helpful and kind.” She leads her life fully devoted to these ideals — truly, my mother is the kindest woman alive. There is not a moment of her day she does not spend caring for or worrying about others.

It is from her that I get my soft optimism in people’s inherent goodness. My mother’s profound empathy invests her so deeply in others’ well-being that a dead turtle in our yard is utterly devastating. I am always working to cultivate that in myself.

My mom is also a workaholic, and as I’ve grown older, I’ve come to understand that part of why my mom works so hard is to ensure that she fulfills her obligations to those around her. She strives for perfection in her work for her students’ benefit, not her own advantage.

As the valedictorian of her high school, my mother set a towering standard for my childhood self. I suffered from an entirely self-imposed mandate to live up to her achievements despite my parents’ constant reassurance that they in no way shared those expectations of me.

I think we are both tormented by a fear of disappointing others, which manifests in an anxious discipline when it comes to our responsibilities.

What my dad calls a “short fuse” I prefer to reframe as a low tolerance for bullshit.

I think this traces back to my father’s resolute convictions of how the world ought to be. He is highly opinionated, but also equally pragmatic, which means his opinions are usually correct. And he holds no reservations about expressing these opinions in the appropriate contexts.

My father has always been the planner in my family, and my years spent answering his incessant questions has bestowed

upon me an aptitude for logistics that often leaves me to be the one ensuring plans make it out of the group chat.

Further, his confidence in his understanding of the world makes winning an argument with him an impossibility. That’s not to say that I haven’t tried — and I can’t count the number of times I’ve laid in bed an hour later and realized that he was right.

We are both fierce defenders of what we believe in. Where my mom taught me it’s ok for things to matter to me, my dad ensured I would never be ashamed to show that they matter. My father complements my mom’s sensitive idealism with his just sense of initiative. And they instilled both demeanors, with their accompanying advantages and disadvantages into their daughter.

I am not a carbon copy of either of my parents, but, as Sabrina framed it, their synthesis. It is the blessing and curse passed down from my parents that I simultaneously feel so strongly and so loudly. This sentimental intensity which has defined much of my life experience is one I can only attribute to being the offspring of two of the most vivid feelers I know.

I wonder whether I am alone. I wonder if any other kid idolized their parents, loved them so fiercely that to be anyone other than them was equivalent to personal failure. I am sure I am not.

I no longer sing in college. Maybe it’s a sign that I am becoming my own person. The thought is so terrifying it makes me want to peel off my skin. For my whole life, I have organized my identity around living up to my ideal of my parents. Without this structural framework, I am lost, an untethered and directionless ego with no method of affirming my value.

I don’t think my parents are perfect. I just think they’re the best. Who wouldn’t want to be like that?

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his daughter to see.

I was a dedicated student.

Yet the most emblematic instance of my usurpation of my parents’ interests is my unwavering and frankly overzealous support of the Boston Red Sox.

For my father, who grew up in Framingham, Massachusetts, baseball is an integral aspect of his identity and experiences. His closest friends to this day are those he travels with across America to visit ballparks, not a game night goes by that NESN doesn’t occupy our living room TV, and he keeps a physical scorebook in which he records every game he sees in person.

I remember toddling through Fenway Park at three years old. In one hand, my dad held the reused plastic Walgreens bag in which he kept that scorebook, in the other, he held mine. I had barely begun to write by the time I began to score. Flipping back to 2010 reveals my crooked pencil etchings that refused to stay inside the boxes from the games my dad brought me along to. In one of these margins, I scribbled an impassioned testament: “I love Daddy.”

People often ask incredulously why baseball is my favorite sport. While I can provide an itemized, rigorous argument in its defense, I think my mother put it best:

“You really liked spending time with your father,” she said with a shrug, “doing things that you could see he really enjoyed doing with you.”

Baseball could never be boring if it meant sharing something with my dad.

It is a classic case of syllogism. I love my parents, when they hang out with me we do things they enjoy, therefore I love those things.

In retrospect, I begin to see how I received essentially all of my childhood passions and enterprises from my parents. I saw rejection of their interests as a rejection of their love, and perhaps mistakenly believed that saying “no,” meant we would no longer spend time together.

College has liberated me to explore a plethora of new pastimes that I doubt my parents would elect to participate in themselves. This novel capacity to choose my activities for myself, rather than happily accept whatever form of recreation my parents signed me

“this is for me,” as I continue into adulthood, truly embracing these traits as my own.

Even as I experiment, one thing is certain: I will always be a Red Sox fan.

Still, my dad was skeptical that our shared interests were anything exceptional. From his perspective, you’re always going to develop an affinity for what you’re surrounded by. However, he concedes other realms are not so easily influenced.

“In terms of personality, I don’t think you can really control that,” he said.

That may be so, but I nevertheless have gradually commandeered my parents’ ways of being. I internalized everything from their dispositions, to their world views, their politics and their mannerisms. There are small congruencies: my mom and my perpetual bad posture or our shared habit of collecting little things that bring us joy. There are more significant similarities, too.

“I think you have

a big heart,” my mom said when I asked which of their own traits they see in me. “You get that from Mummy,” my dad added. When it came to what I inherited from him:

“You have a short fuse. That you got from me.”

My mom drilled into my brother and I the same mantra that guided her family



ILLUSTRATION BY NELLIE KENNEY

WEEKEND RECOMMENDS:
WATCHING OLD HOME VIDEOS