

“Wonders of Forgiveness”

Dawn sat in her car, foot hovering over the gas, waiting for a red light that seemed to mock her. She was on the way home from one of her weekly therapy sessions and all she wanted was to go home and think about it over a cup of tea – or perhaps hot chocolate – she’d have to decide when she made it home. The light turned to green, and she was forced to snap out of her thoughts as the car behind her honked. She pressed down on the gas and continued driving.

As Dawn drove, somewhat mindlessly due to her familiarity with the way home, she thought about some of the things Becky, her therapist, had said.

“Dawn, what he said to you was never okay. But, whether he apologized or not, you need to start forgiving him.”

“This is weighing on you, and he doesn’t even remember what he said. Holding onto this is only hurting you. It has no effect on him; holding this grudge is pointless.”

“You can’t be so hard on yourself. You were thirteen years old; of course you made mistakes, but you have to forgive yourself.”

“She has forgiven you, even if there was nothing to forgive. Why can’t you?”

Dawn’s response to forgiving herself was always something along the lines of, “I can’t- I don’t know why she forgave me so easily. I hurt her. I turned against who I am as a person, just so that my dad would approve of me. I never thought I could do something like that.”

Suddenly, the road was starting to look blurry; she quickly blinked away the tears. Everytime she thought about it all, Dawn couldn’t help but feel guilty and ashamed. She found it easier to focus on forgiving her dad, seeing as she’d already been working on that for years, and ignore the rest.

Ever since Dawn had been little, her relationship with her dad had been complicated. Of course she loved him, but he had said plenty of hurtful stuff to her that stuck to this day.

“Dawn, you have to stop being so sensitive.”

“Dawn, you know I was joking, why are you so upset?”

“Dawn, why don’t you talk to me? You never tell me about your feelings”

As she’d gotten older, she learned how to have conversations with him that kept any arguments from happening, but that meant she had to keep certain things to herself. She became an expert at toeing the line between her truth and his truth. She couldn’t talk to him about her anxiety, unless, of course, she wanted to be told that she was being dramatic, sensitive, or an attention-seeker. She made several other adjustments to what she would and wouldn’t say when talking to her dad, all to avoid any sort of confrontation. And, as she learned to censor her feelings, she also learned to keep her mouth shut if he said or did anything that hurt her.

When she was younger, he would get frustrated with her if she cried over something seemingly pointless. He always saw it as attention-seeking behavior, but she was *five*. Of course she cried over minor things, such as not liking a certain food or having to stop playing with her toys. 5-year-olds don’t have the emotional maturity to cope with that kind of stuff. Unfortunately, Dawn’s dad didn’t always see it that way, and she would be sent to her room, rather than

comforted when she needed it most. At some point, when she was much older, she brought this up to her dad, expressing how it had hurt her. It took her a lot of time to build up the confidence to confess this, and at the end of it all, he simply said that he stood by the way he parented her and wasn't sorry. So, of course Dawn wouldn't forgive him. No apology meant no forgiveness, right?

But as Becky had said, "Holding onto this is only hurting you. It has no effect on him; holding this grudge is pointless," and she wasn't wrong. Her dad was never going to apologize for it, and she needed to stop holding onto hope that he would. She needed to stop waiting for him to apologize so she could forgive him, because if she did, she would bring it to her grave.

No. He didn't *deserve* it. He'd done more than just that throughout her childhood, and he had never apologized. She couldn't just forgive him; he hadn't earned it.

"Dawn, what he said to you was never okay. But, whether he apologized or not, you need to start forgiving him. This is weighing on you, not him."

Dawn quickly turned on her turn signal, remembering at the last second that she needed to make a right turn up ahead.

So... maybe it wasn't about what he deserved. It's not like he *cared* that he hadn't apologized. He didn't feel bad about it. In his mind, he was in the right; he had done nothing wrong. Dawn was the only one being hurt because of all this, and she was slowly coming to that realization.

She made the turn onto Jefferson Avenue and continued to think it through. Perhaps it didn't matter what he deserved. *She* deserved to remove the overwhelming weight from her chest by forgiving him. And so, as she pulled into her driveway, she took a deep breath... and did exactly that. It wasn't as simple as saying, "I forgive him." She would have done it years ago if it were. After all, she had started therapy when she was 8 and it wasn't until 9 years later that she managed to jump over one of her biggest hurdles. She was able to say the words aloud with no doubt. She truly believed them.

She climbed out of the car and grabbed her bag from the passenger seat, leaning across the center console in order to do so. She headed inside and walked through the kitchen, finding her mother in the living room. They greeted each other with a hug, before Dawn went upstairs to her room. She laid down on the bed, reached for her laptop, and turned on a random forty minute long Youtube video. As the video started, she frowned, realizing why that feeling in her chest hadn't completely dissipated, only lessened.. She'd forgiven her dad, but she still hadn't forgiven herself. Why was it so much easier to forgive him and all that he had *intentionally* done, compared to forgiving her own mistakes?

She slowly realized she needed to muddle through the other half of her pain. And that meant thinking about all she had pushed away. But Dawn was determined to figure this out, and so began thinking all the way back to the start. Back when she was 13, a little under a year after everything had shut down, due to Covid-19, she had decided she wanted to live in California with her dad. Dawn had been living with her mom for most of her life, visiting her dad only on holidays and school breaks. She hadn't been able to travel to see him during the pandemic, so she

had begun to idealize him in his absence. Although so much had gone into the decision to move, it was now impossible for Dawn to comprehend what had consumed her so much to make what she now saw as a completely stupid and insensible decision. Her mom had always been so supportive of her; putting her into therapy when she needed it, sitting with her when she was having panic attacks that lasted over an hour, and overall, just being there for her no matter what. Her dad had tried sometimes, but for the most part, he'd fallen short. He made her feel as though she was too sensitive and invalid for feeling and being human, even as a little kid. So why on Earth would she suddenly have wanted to *live* there?

Not too long after she made the decision, she told her parents. Her mom had, of course, refused to allow it and despite the fact that she'd gone about in a respectful way and had logical reasons for it, Dawn had been frustrated with her refusal. She couldn't understand why her mom wouldn't be as supportive with this as she had been with everything else. And, with the addition of her dad being incredibly supportive and even excited about it, it felt like her parents had switched roles.

Dawn felt guilty thinking about it all now. She knew exactly why her mom had refused; she had sat with Dawn every time she was distraught over things her dad said to her on a regular basis. Of course she wouldn't want or allow her daughter to live there and suffer through being so invalidated and ignored. Even the one time she felt her mother wasn't being supportive, she really had been. That made her feel even more guilty. It would've been fantastic if she had realized 4 years sooner.

Nowadays, she couldn't even understand why she had decided that she wanted to live with her dad. It truly was a foolish idea, but she could name several reasons why she had gotten to that point, so long as she looked at it in a new light.

When she made the decision, she had been visiting her dad for the first time in over a year. Dawn hadn't seen him for so long, and was excited to spend more time with him once she was there.

Plus, with Covid restrictions just beginning to get removed at the time, she was able to go out and do more things with her dad. When Dawn was with her mom, she had been locked up in the house for what felt like forever. If her brain had associated all the fun things with her dad and the restrictions of Covid with her mom, could she really blame it for making those unconscious connections? She had no control over that.

She also had an innate sense of justice. If she had lived with her mom for a little over the first half of her early childhood, then it was only fair that she would live with her dad for the other half.

And, of course when she told her dad about the decision, she couldn't remove the look on his face from her memory. He had been so happy, so... proud. She rarely got that from him and she didn't want to lose it by changing her mind. So, even though she doubted it sometimes, she just did everything to make it seem like the best decision she could ever make.

About a year later, everything had been brought to court, and not too long after the court had refused to let her live with him, she changed her mind. Following her return to reality, she

was overwhelmingly grateful that her mom had fought to keep her. Dawn was grateful that the judge made the decision that she couldn't make for herself. She realized that if her dad had won, she would've been miserable in California, and she would forever be grateful for the people who realized that long before she did.

However, throughout the whole court process that followed, she had done some things she felt horrible about to this day. She had become closer to her dad during all of this, and because of that, he felt more comfortable saying things about her mom that he would've never said otherwise. Most of the time, she didn't stop him.

Dawn's mother had several different disabilities that made her life extremely difficult. Dawn's father had started to say things he never used to say around her. It had started off small, and she had sometimes even laughed at a "joke" he made.

Later on, the comments had stopped being so small. At one point, her dad had told her that he thought her mom wasn't actually disabled. He believed that she was just addicted to the pain medicine she was on. That was the moment things shifted for Dawn. She knew that wasn't true; she had seen the days when her mom could barely walk because of Endometriosis, or the times she had dislocated her shoulder in her sleep because of her EDS. There was no way she was faking it. She never said she agreed, she just sort of nodded along when he said it and then changed the subject. But she didn't say anything to negate it. She didn't defend her mom: the woman who would've defended her with everything she had if the need arose. Dawn always thought she would do the same for her, but that moment had proved otherwise. She didn't know if she could ever forgive herself for that.

She blinked rapidly, her eyes tearing up again. She hated thinking about it. Maybe that was one of the reasons she hadn't forgiven herself yet. If she couldn't even think about it all without crying, how was she supposed to figure it all out? She took a deep breath, and forced herself to keep contemplating it all. She may not be able to forgive herself tonight, but if she could at least start understanding why she did what she did, then she would be on the right track.

She paused the video and went downstairs to the kitchen, remembering her desire to have hot chocolate. Dawn grabbed the first mug she saw from the cabinet and poured some milk into it, before microwaving it and adding the chocolate. She stirred it for a minute before heading back upstairs.

"Focus, Dawn..." she repeatedly murmured under her breath to herself like a mantra.

Another of her conversations with Becky came to mind, and she was reminded of several factors that had gone into it.

"You were 13. He was the adult in the situation. He shouldn't have said that to you."

"You have a fear of conflict, and we're working on that, but you can't expect yourself to just be able to confront people every single time. That's not fair to yourself."

She had tried to hear her out, but she struggled to believe it. She always felt like it was all just excuses to cover up that she had done something, she believed, was horrible. It wasn't just excuses though. It was facts, facts that played into every single thing that she did. How can a 13 year old be expected to tell her dad that he was wrong for saying something so horrible,

especially when he had shut her down about other things countless times. She held herself to such high and impossible standards, and maybe *that's* why she was able to forgive him for everything else so much easier than herself; she didn't hold him to those same standards.

Even her mom had said she didn't feel there was anything to forgive.

After Dawn had changed her mind about wanting to live there, she quickly worked to fix her relationship with her mom. And that work paid off, as they were back to the way they were, if not better than before. She told her mom most of the things that had been said around or to her during the whole process and her mom, like always, had been nothing but understanding. As Dawn sobbed because she felt so horrible for never standing up against her dad for some of the terrible things he had said, her mom had spoken up and said the words that Dawn hadn't realized she desperately needed to hear.

"Dawn. I forgive you. If there was ever anything to forgive, then I forgive you."

Dawn could tell her mom was only saying it because she knew she needed to hear it; she never actually felt the need to forgive Dawn because she'd never been upset about any of it. In the end though, it had meant the world to her to hear those words.

Dawn sniffled, and reached for the tissue box near her bed. She wiped her nose and then grabbed a pencil from her backpack, along with a piece of notebook paper. She quickly wrote down all of the reasons why she thought she had done the things she did. It helped to organize these thoughts on paper, and she could bring them to Becky at her next therapy session, and they would talk through it all.

And hopefully, sometime soon, she would be able to say, "I forgive myself."

Glancing towards her laptop, Dawn realized she hadn't been paying attention to the video that was playing. She settled down into her bed, relaxed and comfortable, before starting it over again.