

## The Thought Experiment

I often would have this thought experiment where I would imagine having conversations with my younger self. I would reassure her that this thing or that would work out after all, no need to get so worked up about it. I would blow her mind by telling her something about me that she would find unthinkable, like telling my 9-year-old self that adult me loves sushi or telling my teenage self that I have a teenage daughter of my own and I'm a "cool mom." The teenage me always tells me I'm delusional on this point. She insists, being the typical contrarian teen, that my daughter might say that adult me is cool to my face but she's just being kind and inwardly finds me as unrelatable and unhip as any adult guilty of breeding. I always laugh and insist that if the two of them knew each other they would be besties.

That's where the thought experiment usually ends. For whatever reason, I say this in my imagination but I can't actually imagine my teenage self and my daughter hanging out. Maybe because I can't see myself out of the context of my teenage experience, doing things teenagers today do. I can't imagine my teenage self texting, or having a YouTube channel—the horror. At the same time, I can't picture, or don't want to picture, my daughter doing the nonsense we would do as bored suburban teenagers. Not that she would. Natalie, my daughter, is a very active student involved in sports, clubs and is treasurer of the ASB. Every time the thought experiment conversation leads to the insistence on my part of us being "besties" it's always a claim I can't actually back up.

"What's this?" Natalie, asked. She held a composition notebook with the covers decorated with colorful collages, with a DIY lamination technique of strips of scotch tape. She was standing in front of a bin full of these notebooks, all decorated in the same fashion, and other random items from a different era. "My god, there are a ton of these."

I had roped her into the annual purge of unused stuff to go to Goodwill paired in with a long overdue attic reorganizing project I wanted to accomplish. The attic had become the place where stuff just went when one couldn't think where else to put it and I wanted to go in and organize and find things that no longer needed a home under my roof. Natalie agreed to sacrifice a Sunday on this effort, which now put her in front of this lost ark of late nineties artifacts.

"What are these?"

"Those," I said, walking over to join her at the bin, "are my journals from high school."

"Get out," she said, and flipped open the first page. "Yep, 'January 18, 1997.' That's funny, I don't see you as the purple sparkly pen type."

"Gell pens were all the rage. Trust me, it passed. A few entries in, I'm sure it goes away."

Natalie started flipping through the pages. Eventually the script went from various difficult to read colors to your standard black with an occasional blue thrown in. Some pages had pictures of friends taped on them or what looked like seemingly random pictures of long-dead or now geriatric rock stars pulled from old Rolling Stone magazines or printed on the home bubble jet printer in black and white.

"Can I take a break and look at these?"

That she showed an interest at all warmed my heart. Even twenty some odd years removed, the teenager inside me yearning for attention and to be understood screamed to have her voice discovered, although the adult had nagging grown-up reservations.

"You know these are meant to be private, right?" I said, still undecided as to which version of me was going to win out on this one. Ironically, twenty years ago, the teen wouldn't want strange eyes, family members, even, peering through these pages -- now she longed for it, for her to live again. It was the adult voice that knew the contents of those pages and thought better of it. Of course, the adult voice was the same mind that conducted those thought experiments. She, too, was curious to see Natalie and teenage mom meet over the page. Curiosity won out but adult felt this warranted an advisory content warning.

“It’s not like a blog or social media where you edit yourself for a public audience, you know. It’s raw thoughts and feelings...” I paused for a moment debating whether or not to add further honesty “...occasionally while intoxicated.”

Natalie’s expression turned sour as she closed the notebook.

“There’s no sex stuff in there, is there? No offence, mom, but I don’t wanna know--”

A sinking feeling and panic struck me at the thought of losing her interest, even if it probably was for the better.

“There’s no sex stuff,” I interrupted. “Much to my chagrin at the time. You have my permission. Go on, take a breather. You’re welcome to ask any questions.”

She pulled the notebooks out and took them with her to a cleared area against the wall where she sat down. I got back to work. She went through each notebook and looked at the first date, and put them in order for herself. A twinge of fear came over me.

“And no teasing me for my terrible spelling. There is not a spell check when writing on paper and your impeccable spelling comes from your father’s side.”

“Clearly,” she said looking in the notebook.

“Don’t shame me,” I joked the felt another pang of fear. “And skip anything the looks like and attempt at poetry. I can assure you, it’s terrible.”

“It’s all right, ma,” Natalie said, “You’re an angsty teenager, you’re entitled to write bad poetry. Now stop apologizing and let me read, well, skim for the good parts.”

I let her sit and read while I went back to work. I moved boxes, separated that which was destined for donation, and consolidated half-empty bins and banker’s boxes into other bins and banker’s boxes. All the while, my mind was hurriedly recounting episodes of my past with a mix of nostalgia and anxiety. What would my 17-year-old daughter think of my behavior in those manic and angst-riddled years between 14 and 18? I remembered how we hung out at Denny’s because it was a place we could sit down and smoke without being questioned our age and drink coffee but rarely ordered much in the way of food, or if we did, we made a horrible mess on the table and paid very little in way of a tip. Was that in there? The fact that Alex, my closest male friend, and my other male friends would tinker with homemade explosives and with great pomp and circumstance we would detonate them in Alex’s large back yard. The stupid pranks we embarked on to quell the boredom of the suburbs and the hell we raised as vengeance for the sleepiness of our town. My heart sank at the thought of our abhorrent behavior with some “pranks” like egging innocent homes for fun or even endangering lives with pranks like “Cardboard Cat.” Oh god, Carboard Cat, probably the worst thing we did—where we would make a cardboard cutout of a cat, colored it black with the use of thick, stinky markers, and gave it reflective eyes of tinfoil, then set it out in the middle of the street at night and watched as cars swerved around it. This was not just terrible but potentially life-threatening.

I didn’t worry so much about the drinking and the pot-smoking and the other drugs taken by friends. I was confident that we instilled in Natalie a healthy, adult understanding of these vices and their ups and downs. Besides, in a state where marijuana is sold legally, it’s not the taboo it was in our day. Not to mention that I knew inside those pages were plenty of after-school-special-like stories of binge drinking leading to consequences and friend’s addictions leading to rehab. It was more the asshole behavior I wanted to apologize for. However, any time I started to interject, she shushed me. So, I just carried on, fretting more and more about what she would see as disgraceful, because now that I thought about it, there was plenty there for her to be disappointed in me. Maybe this was a bad idea.

“Wow,” she said. “That was...enlightening.”

Naturally she finished reading right as I was about done with my cleanup project. The items slotted for purging were all downstairs waiting to be packed in the car while all the bins and boxes were neatly stacked and packed away. The only bin still out being the one that held my old journals and teenage mementos. She stood up and stretched.

"I'm not proud of all of that stuff, you know. It was a different time," I said, managing to both apologize and defend myself at the same time. She didn't say anything, looking like she was still processing or trying to find the right words. "There wasn't as much emphasis on empathy in young people back then, which is probably why we seemed to pride ourselves on being generally obnoxious."

"It's not that," she finally said. "You were really obsessed with your friend, Alex."

In my worrying about what she would read, I couldn't believe I didn't think about the obvious, my four-year torment of unrequited love with my closest male friend. Funny that I didn't think about that sooner, as I'm sure that's probably what the angsty poetry was all about. I fell for him the first day of my freshman year of high school and was still in love with him when we graduated.

"Yes, I harbored a crush--"

"That's putting it mildly," she said as she pulled one arm over her shoulder to stretch her back.

"Okay, you're right. I was stuck in misery, in unrequited love with one of my best friends." I felt a little embarrassed when I realized just how much pinning she must have had to skim through. Oh god, why didn't I think of that?

"Well now, you're trying to romanticize it," she said and she moved to stretching the other arm, then put her arms down and said, quite frankly, "It's gross."

Of all the unacceptable behavior in my past I was taken aback with her taking issue with my growing pain of unrequited love.

"Well that seems a bit harsh--"

"That's like some serious incel stuff," she insisted.

"Incel stuff," I said, somewhat aghast. She rolled her eyes and started to explain.

"Incels, involuntary celibates. Lonely, pathetic men who can't get any because they have nothing to offer and so they gather together over the internet to bemoan women until they lose it and eventually kill someone."

"Yes, dear, I know what an incel is," I said in a petulant, dismissive tone. "I don't see any resemblance between my pining for Alex and a misogynistic incel plotting violence to get back at the sex that shunned him."

"Well, no you weren't violently lashing out, true, but that stuff comes from the same place, you know, obsession. Obsession and a disregard for the will of the person in question."

"What do you mean, 'disregard for their will'?"

"Well you told him that you liked him..."

"I wrote him a letter exposing my love for him but he didn't feel the same way and went on to date a friend of mine, which broke my heart."

"And when was that?"

"My freshman year," I said sheepishly.

"And that's your point. You carried on liking the guy for four years, in the desperate hopes that he would change his mind. You disregarded his rejection, his will."

"I disagree," I said, defensively. "He said, 'I like you as a friend' and we were friends. Very close friends."

"But all the while you were just pining away waiting, hoping for the day that he would come around and see you the way you saw him, which is a kind of a dishonest friendship, wouldn't you say?"

"Where do you get this stuff?"

"TEDtalk."

"Right."

"They showed it in health class. I don't remember the guy's name. He said unrequited love isn't really 'love' at all because love, by definition, love is mutually consensual. So really, it's an unhealthy infatuation. You don't even 'love' that person because you put them up on a pedestal that makes you

only see certain qualities and not others. You don't see them as a whole person. Even if you think you do, you don't."

I nodded, following her argument. I wanted to point out that I was in love whilst being well aware of, or in spite of, Alex's troubled years and imperfections but I let her continue.

"And that dehumanization of the subject of your desire can lead to violence or violating that person."

"I never *violated* or committed *violence* to my friend," I objected. Our voices were rising in volume.

"No you, but what about those friends of your who literally stalked a guy they liked!"

"Well, yeah. That did happen. I had forgotten about that."

"Yeah, that's messed up and you mentioned it passively like it was nothing."

"Well, I think it was a bit of a lark at the time."

"What the hell, mom! It happened and it was messed up."

"Well that wasn't me. None of that sinister stuff happened with me. No violence against him. No stalking. It was innocent."

"You don't think maybe you were doing yourself a disservice as well?"

This is where, from the distance of time and hindsight, she had me. Of course I knew what a disservice it was to myself. I had lived the consequences of over four years of unrequited love and it was a misery.

"You don't think that taking the rejection and just moving on would have opened you up to seeing other people and maybe having more self-confidence?"

"You say it like it's a faucet that I can just shut off. It's not as easy as that. I only had eyes for one person, I couldn't explain it or talk myself out of it. I was just a stupid kid that had to work this out for myself. I thought your generation was all about empathy? Somehow you've got the idea I'm the bad guy."

"Mom--" She tried to get a word in but I was not ready to let go.

"It's not like I'm the only person, you know. It is a part of the human condition. Shakespeare's Helena, Curano de Bergeac, I always sympathized with these characters because I've felt it and it is agony. Your generation looks down at the human condition for not being pure enough. Every imperfection is a monstrous transgression. My suffering was 'problematic.' I'm a garbage person for loving someone."

"Mom, calm down."

"You know, it's not as easy for everyone as it is for you." I stopped myself there, knowing I was about to go down a path it was not wise to take. Silence filled the room. Dust particles danced in the air between us as the lowering afternoon light streamed in through the windows. Both of us seemed to be holding our breath. She was smart enough to not say anything in this moment. I don't think I would have been as smart in her position at her age.

"Put this stuff away," I said. "I'm making the Goodwill drop."

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I was still stewing when I finished loading the car with boxes and bags of things destined to go to Goodwill. As I got in the car and put our home in the rear-view mirror I was still letting my anger hold the reigns and steer me away from thoughts of what terrible things I almost said to my own child. I almost threw in her face something dark held down in the depths that's too unpleasant for me to admit. Maybe I am a monster.

I knew full well why I couldn't picture the teenage me and Natalie in the same universe, being besties. Let's face it, teenage me would be sitting in a corner dressed in all black with Marilyn Manson playing on her walkman, looking at kids like Natalie and resenting the hell out her. Teenage me would loathe Natalie's privilege of being naturally confident, good looking, well liked--not at all socially awkward--and without an inch of the angst I considered "healthy" to the teenaged soul at the time. Adult me, of course is able to put it plainly, my daughter is far more emotionally intelligent than I was at her age. Maybe now I could accept that teenage me harbored that resentment, but did the adult?

The adult me had come to the same conclusions on the subject of unrequited love. By college I was saying the same thing to friends if I thought I saw them falling for the someone who might break their heart. "You don't want to go that road, man, it's nothing but pain, take it from me. Take a shot and make out with some rando at this party and move on." Okay maybe still not as emotionally intelligent as Natalie is now. And, although I felt the incel correlation to my circumstance was off base, I have to concede that that is the context in which she has grown up. In her eyes, unrequited love doesn't harken thoughts of a Shakespearian character or even Ducky's love for Molly Ringwald. It's news stories about a kid who came to school with a gun and blew away the object of his affection and her suitor, or a kid targeting women with a gun on the street, or a guy mowing down innocent people in a van because he felt scorned by the opposite sex. That is her reality.

The kid wasn't wrong and adult me knew that, so why had I gotten so worked up and lashed out? Or was that teenage me lashing out? Though the two of us were separated by over twenty years, could I tell where one began and one ended inside of me?

I pulled in to the drop off area outside the Goodwill, opened the back of the hatchback and started to unload, keeping my head down. An older man with a head of grey hair and a full, grey beard wearing a Goodwill uniform and back brace came out and picked up the boxes and bags which I set down on the ground to bring them inside. I felt my phone vibrate in my back pocket and faintly heard the ding notifying me of a received text message. I took a brief moment to look at my phone. The message was from Natalie.

*"I'm sorry I upset you. You shared your private thoughts with me and I cruelly crapped all over them. I'm sorry I didn't appreciate how painful that was for you and I should have, especially having just read it all. I hope you can accept my apology."*

The man came back out to grab more things and I quickly put my phone back in my back pocket and returned to pulling things out of my car.

"You all right, miss?" the old guy said, putting a hand on the back of my arm. I was crying and not hiding it as well as I thought.

"Fine, fine," I said, pulling away instinctively. My mind quickly thought of an excuse, a way to laugh it off, "So many memories."

He took his cue and went back to his work, also keeping his head down now until it was time to give me my receipt with a "You take care, now."

I pulled out of the drop-off area and parked in a space in the parking lot. I pulled my phone out of my back pocket and read the message again. Since her last message, she had added a picture of a cat with big, sad eyes, which made me smile and cry all the more. Natalie knew what I needed to hear better than I could articulate. She could grasp that a part of me—that angsty teenager--wanted to be heard, validated and sympathized with.

Adult me probably should have intervened at some point before the teenage me lashed out. Adult me should have known how much it was to ask of Natalie. After all, of all those thought experiments I've had over the years, not once did I envision a scenario where *my* mother showed me who she was at my age and then demanded sympathy. I had a lot of apologizing to do on my end, but I was going to do the lion share of it in person where I could hug my daughter and hold her before she

grew up completely. She'd already surpassed me and would continue to do so in a myriad of ways, and wasn't that the point--the hope at least--in parenting?

*"Thank you, sweetie. I'm sorry I lashed out on you, that was totally unfair of me. Be home soon."*  
I texted back and pressed send with a sigh of relief.

*"..."*

*"Good because there's still this matter of 'Cardboard Cat' we need to discuss. WTF?"*