

Things I Wish My Parents Had Taught Me

By Yasmin White

My parents, bless their hearts, thought they taught me everything I needed to know to be an “adult.” They tied an anchor steadfastly to all of my dreams so the second my feet began to drift into the cloudy world of confidence, I would be buoyed back to reality. The problem with this was their anchor dragged me far below sea level, straight into the throes of mental illness. As the waves of depression washed over me, and the shore became increasingly harder to see, I would send up a flare to my parents. They responded by telling me that I had better get used to it now; it was only going to get worse as I got older.

My parents taught me that the worst part about growing up was money. They told me I would spend the rest of my life worrying about it, mourning over a lack of it, and spending my last \$2 on a scratch off ticket in hopes of winning enough to buy groceries. If I were lucky, they said, I would find a career that made me miserable in every sense of the word, but I would be able to support myself. That was the goal.

My parents taught me that God was the answer to everything. When I was 17, my doctor told me I had severe arthritis in my jaw and would need a splint. My mother told me I needed to go to church more. Imagine my confusion when I sat on my knees praying for an hour every day for 6 months and still woke up feeling worse.

My mother taught me that abuse was a side-effect of marriage. Every time I asked her why she stayed, the answer was always the same: because that’s what you do. She tried to teach me how to pick my battles before I even learned to tie my shoes, but part of me knew when it came to my body, every battle was worth fighting.

I know my parents were trying their best, but there were so many things I wish they had taught me instead. I wish my parents had taught me to love my reflection in the mirror more than my reflection in a boy's eyes, so that when those eyes wandered to someone else, my self-esteem wouldn't lie scattered around my feet like shrapnel.

I wish my parents taught me that my hands could be soft and maternal and strong and capable all at the same time. I wish they taught me that I could break bread on Sunday and kiss girls on Monday.

I wish my parents taught me that the worst part of growing up is not physical; it's emotional. It's wanting, but being afraid to want. I remember the day my best friend announced her pregnancy. Her brown eyes, lit up with joy, looked like tree rings. I hugged her, remarked how quickly we had grown up, and then went into the bathroom to cry. During the day, I would trace over the list of baby names I had picked out since the 7th grade, but in the dark, I was haunted by nightmares of post-partum depression. There was a recurring one where I had just given birth but when I looked at the baby, I couldn't recognize him. He wasn't mine; he couldn't be. I wanted to run away. I'd give him to the nurse, but when I tried to escape I was tied to the bed. Trapped. So, I popped another Prozac and refilled my birth control.

More than anything, I wish my parents had taught me to stop waiting. To stop waiting to ask for help. To stop waiting for salt to cure my wounds, and to try honey instead. To stop waiting for happiness in marriage and children and job promotions. I wish they taught me that living in a 1500 square foot apartment with the love of my life and three of my best friends would be just as rewarding as purchasing my first house. I wish they taught me that I have just as much worth whether my title is "CEO" or "Aunt" or "Mom." I wish they taught me that one day

I might be living across the country, hopefully with my own bookstore and literary magazine and those will be good days, but dammit these days are good too.

I think my parents didn't teach me this because they didn't know it themselves. They're still sitting in a holler in Eastern Kentucky waiting for a winning lottery ticket or a miracle job promotion. They're listening to the sound of the wind whistling through silver maples hoping that one of the breezes will be the voice of God blessing them with a new life. The thing is: you don't get a happy life—you make one. My parents didn't teach me that but maybe I can teach them.