

On Growing Up Well
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My fourteen-year-old daughter Dee lives in another state with her mother. This is a portion of an email I sent her.

Dear Dee—

You received 100% on your argumentative summary in English? That's a terrific!!! And this is an honors English class with very high standards. I'm so very proud of your accomplishment. Yes, send me a copy, I'd love to see it.

A big part of growing up is finding out what you are good at and like to do. At its best, adult living, which you're now preparing for, involves doing what you are good at and like to do, including earning money doing that. Getting this high argumentative summary score is telling you that you are good at this kind of thing. Especially if you like to do this kind of thing, you might think about creating opportunities to do more of it now and how you might do it when you are an adult, including in your career.

The same thing applies with someone telling you that you are a rock star [the owner of a ski-instruction business Dee worked for described her in those terms]—what I would call having presence. Your middle school teachers and high school leadership class teacher told you that you are a natural leader. I mentioned in my message yesterday that a golf professional at the course here [in Burlington, Vermont, where Dee played recently], Mr. [last name] said you have the best golf swing he's ever seen on a young golfer. And I've told you that your pencil drawings are wonderful.

You're getting A's in your classes--geometry, biology, Spanish, English, all of them. That's telling you that you are good in those subjects, and at going to school generally. Looking back at my life, I never had a better time than when I was doing graduate study at the university. I was getting my doctor of philosophy

degree, which would qualify me to get a job as a professor, but also, I was doing something—taking classes and learning—that I was good at and liked to do. I’m not saying it was always fun, a lot of it was hard, exhausting work. But still, for me it was a really good time and gratifying, satisfying, it made me feel good, and happy.

The same with the writing I’ve done, books and articles. I’ve loved doing it and I am proud of what I have created. Now that I’m very old, I can’t write as I did before, but I’m so happy that when I had the chance to do it, I wrote. I didn’t spend my life, as so many people do, doing things and working at jobs I wasn’t particularly good at and didn’t like to do. You are a superb writer. Some day you won’t be able to write, so write while you can. Some day you won’t be able to play golf, so play golf and enjoy it and see how good you can get at it while you still can.

Something you are learning about yourself--this is very important--is that you have it in you to work really, really hard to get something you want. I know you worked really, really hard on the final exams. But wasn’t the result worth all that effort? And even if the grades hadn't been as good as they turned out to be, it would have still felt worth the effort. Working really, really hard to get something done that matters to you, doing your best at something, feels good no matter how it things turn out.

Take some time now to praise yourself for all the hard work you are putting into your classes. You can be very proud of yourself for doing your best at that. I’m incredibly proud of you for what you did, and Mom is too.

Whatever you do, like tonight and tomorrow and the next day, choose to be happy doing it. Simply, it is better to be happy than unhappy. By happy I mean feeling satisfied, gratified, at peace, with yourself and your life, feeling good about your life. When you get up in the morning, tell yourself, “I’m going to be happy today.” And then, moment-by-moment, the best you can, live your life that day in a way that makes you happy. Look for ways to be happy rather than for reasons to be unhappy.

And remember, doing things that make you feel good in the short run—like eating a candy bar, or watching a dumb movie—will make you unhappy in the long run. You have to see how doing something now will affect your life later on.

I'll look for your English writing, and your final biology grade (don't let it bother you that the biology teacher is slow reporting grades, focus your attention on what you can control).

You're doing something right, Dee. Figure out what it is and do more of it.

Love always,

Daddy