

August 02, 2008

Dear Laura ...

I have been thinking a great deal about the fact that you graduated from college in May. I am wondering about the choices that are in front of you and how you are going about choosing the path for your life that feels right. It can be overwhelming! I have thought about whether I can offer any advice to you as you go out in the world and explore. The only thing that came to mind was for me to write you about my experience when I graduated from college thirty years ago.

The best place to start this story is several months before my graduation from college. In case you did not know, I attended Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. The campus is beautiful. The surrounding countryside is incredible ... wondrous mountains, rolling landscape, and the beach only three hours away. Every one on campus is the cream of the crop from their respective high schools. I had so many great friends and fraternity brothers. Because I had to move every couple of years while growing up, I was pretty tired of having to start all over again in some unknown place. So, I decided that I would like to stay in North Carolina following graduation and look for a job or attend graduate school at one of the many fine schools in the state.

Then in March of my senior year, my parents called from our home of five years in Rockville, Maryland to say that they had accepted orders to move to Honolulu, Hawaii. A wonderful place to be without a doubt! The catch was that my mother's mother lived several miles away from them in Maryland. My grandmother was eighty-five years old, was not in the greatest of health, and, as such, was unwilling to go to Hawaii with my folks. This made the move difficult for my mother to contemplate as she was very close to her mother and had become my grandmother's primary care giver. All three of my mother's older sisters and their families lived either out-of-state or overseas. The move to Hawaii meant that there would not be any family member nearby to offer my grandmother help.

Hence ... my father's request that I move back to Maryland following graduation and become my grandmother's primary caregiver. At the risk of sounding selfish, I must admit to being more than a little bit disappointed. Everything seemed so inviting in North Carolina. I did not really want to move back to Maryland.

After a few more telephone calls, I finally relented and said that I would move back to Maryland. And so, one week after graduation, I returned to Rockville and spent the next few days helping my parents pack up their belongings and then watched them head off for Hawaii. I moved in with my grandmother. I had resumed my summer job at the Post Office serving as a carrier. I would return "home" every night and fix my grandmother dinner. Then we would play cards or read or watch television.

During the six weeks that followed my parents' departure, my grandmother went to the hospital several times with heart pain. One Friday morning while she at the hospital for the third time, I received a call at the Post Office from the hospital saying that my grandmother had taken a turn for the worse and that I had better come right away. I immediately dropped everything and headed for the hospital. Thirty minutes later

I arrived at the nurse's station and was told that my grandmother had passed away just ten minutes earlier.

And so ... there I was. Of all the four sisters, their husbands, and my ten cousins, I was the only one present. One wonders about fate and circumstance and why things happen the way that they do. As I look back on this time, I am so grateful for the time I had with her. I consider myself to have been so very blessed that I was the one privileged to share in my grandmother's last days. This is why I had to return from North Carolina. I could not have known how things would work out four months earlier when I was asked to move back to Maryland.

In the two months that followed, I continued to work at the Post Office during the day and began the huge chore of settling the affairs of my grandmother. During those months, I thought about my own immediate future. There were many question marks. Because I returned to Maryland and found myself caring for my grandmother, I had not yet started my search for a "real job" or made any applications to graduate school. I knew that once I sold my grandmother's home (which I was required to do), I would have no place to live.

At the end of the summer, my temporary appointment at the Post Office was over. I found myself working full-time on settling my grandmother's affairs. Everything was a bit more complicated as my eldest aunt was the Executrix ... and she was living in Amsterdam at the time. I was granted power-of-attorney so that I could register the Will, sell the house, sell the car, and settle all of the various financial and legal affairs.

It was during this time that I met and became friends with my grandmother's next door neighbors ... a nice elderly couple. It turned out that the husband was a retired biologist. When he found out that I had majored in biology at Wake Forest, he expressed an interest in helping me find a job.

In the middle of September, my grandmother's house sold. There being no more reason for me to stay in Maryland, I packed up my car (which I bought from the little old lady who lived across the street from my grandmother) and headed back down to North Carolina for awhile.

I spent the next five weeks savoring the fall, going to Wake Forest football games, enjoying the social life on campus without the burden of studying, made sojourns to the mountains on Friday afternoons to watch the sun set, and started looking for job. I went on several interviews in Winston-Salem, Asheville, and the Research Triangle. What a wonderful time! Unfortunately, I did not find a job. So I headed back up to Maryland thinking I might have better luck in the greater Washington area. There are only so many things one can do with a degree in biology.

It was about that time that my father's father fell off of a step stool and broke his leg. While his leg healed, the incident caused him to start "losing his facilities," as they say. Having no immediate job prospects in sight, I decided to make the long drive across the Midwest to Wyoming and spend Thanksgiving with my father's parents and my cousin and his family who also happened to live in Powell, Wyoming. I mentioned that I was planning to do this to my best friend from college, Peter. I soon had a traveling companion. Nothing like being young and heading off on a grand adventure!

I spent two weeks with my grandparents and cousin. Peter and I saw some incredibly beautiful country. After Thanksgiving, we headed down to Denver, Colorado to visit my father's sister and her husband (Aunt Jean and Uncle Stub). We were offered the use of their cabin in Breckenridge and we accepted it! We skied for a week and was it ever cold!

[Click on "Set #1 (Wyoming)" to view pictures from the trip out west.]

In early December, Peter headed back east to spend the holidays with his fiancé. I, on the other hand, headed west to spend Christmas with my parents in Hawaii and spent the next two months there. In February, another dear friend from college, Bruce, came to visit me. We traveled to the island of Kauai, visited with my father's cousin Johnny, and spent six days hiking the Kalalau Trail and "hanging out" in Kalalau Valley ... truly heaven on earth, if there is such a place!

[Click on "Set #2 (Kalalau)" to view pictures from the trip to Kalalau Valley.]

In late February I returned to Colorado to retrieve my car. I drove back across the country, taking a slightly more southern route. I visited a cousin in St. Louis and drove through North Carolina, stopping in Asheville and Winston-Salem.

After only a week at home, Bruce joined me in Maryland and we headed off to Europe on February 28 (2/28 ... a date that would become truly significant). We flew to Luxemburg and took a train to Gothenburg, Sweden where Bruce picked up his new Saab. We drove south through Amsterdam, Germany (visiting some of Bruce's friends), Austria, and Italy. While staying at the Wake Forest house in Venice, we unexpectedly bumped into two of my fraternity brothers who, unbeknownst to us, were doing pretty much the same thing as we were (except without a car). The four of us drove to Florence and met up with some other Wake Forest folks. An incredible three days! The four of us then headed west through Pisa and then south to Rome. After a brief stay there, we headed north, dropping off my two fraternity brothers in Genoa. Bruce and I went on to Monaco and drove up through the center of France. In Paris, quite by chance, we ran into yet another fraternity brother! We then ventured north across the English Channel and on to Gosport to stay with friends of my parents. We saw Stonehenge, Tolkien's grave (outside of Oxford), and the Abbey Road Studio in London—made famous by the Beatles. After a week in England, we traveled back across the channel, through Belgium, and returned to Luxemburg. While Bruce headed back down south to Italy and Greece, it was time for me to head home to Maryland.

[Click on "Set #3 (Europe)" to view pictures from the trip to Europe.]

That next summer found me back at the Post Office again and in an earnest pursuit of a "real job." I paid a visit to my grandmother's neighbor ... the retired biologist. He put me in touch with the personnel director at the Federation of American Societies of Experimental Biology (FASEB). It turns out that the director, Billy Clement, was a former Navy corpsman who had worked at the Bethesda Naval Hospital. Old Billy even knew my father during my dad's tenure as a teacher at the dental school. Billy was all too eager to help me in my quest!

In early August, I had secured an interview with a small start-up biotechnology company—Bethesda Research Laboratories. During the interview, one of the founders looked at me and said, “You know, you look familiar ... (pause) ... I got it! You delivered my mail last Saturday!” That, and my ability to follow a recipe, got me the job! I started my position as an organic chemist on August 22 (8/22 ... again, note the numbers).

After a couple of months of learning the ropes, I thought I was in heaven ... I was doing things that I remembered my mother’s father doing. He was an organic chemist, as well. When I was young, I watched him with great interest as he worked in his laboratory and thought that maybe this is what I wanted to do when I grew up. Voila!

As for graduate school, it turns out that the same owner of the company was also a biochemistry professor at Georgetown University. Thanks to him, I was admitted to their biochemistry department after one year at work. I began going to graduate school part-time and the company helped pay for my studies. After four long years of full-time work and part-time school, I graduated with a Masters Degree in Biochemistry and soon received a promotion to Group Leader of the Bio-Organics Group. I was on my way!

A year and a half after I started work at Bethesda Research Laboratories, your mother came to work at the same company and in the same laboratory. From this point on, you know the rest of the story.

—oOo—

I sat down to start writing you this letter at 9:30 A.M. this morning. It is now after 1:00 P.M. You might ask why I spent my Saturday doing this. The answer is simple—I enjoy writing. More specifically, I enjoy writing to you! It makes me feel as though you are right here with me, as if I were telling you these things. It reminds of the early Saturday mornings when you, your sister, and I would head off to my basement office. You guys would draw pictures on my old MacIntosh computer while I paid bills. I still have some of the “techno-art” you both did! Wonderful stuff!

The other reason I write to you of my year following college graduation is because I feel a need to document my life—not just because we have been unable to share the last seventeen years together, but because it is in my blood. My father’s father wrote of his life and of my grandmother’s life. I have posted some of his writings on your Web site (see “Heritage”). My father wrote much about his life and, now that he is gone, I cherish his writings. I can read them and feel as though he is here with me, still giving me guidance, still expressing his pride in me, still smiling. Perhaps, one day, you might read my writings and gain some sense of connection with me. Or perhaps you might choose to write about your own life so that, on some distant day, your own children might be able to remember you and pass on a bit of who you are to their children.

Regardless ... the message I wish to leave you with on this summer day is simply this. Do not fret too much about your future if it has not made itself clear to you yet. In time, it will. My decision to leave North Carolina and return to Maryland to watch over my ailing grandmother caused me to meet her neighbor, who led me to FASEB, which lead

me to Billy, who lead me to Bethesda Research Laboratories and a wonderful career and entry into graduate school, which brought me to meeting your mother, which ultimately lead me to you. As a dear friend always says to me—

Everything always works out in the end.

If things aren't working out, you are not at the end.

Have faith in the future, Laura. Have faith in your own skills and talents, of which I am certain you have many. Have faith in yourself. And most of all, have faith in the Good Lord. Give thanks to Him each and every day for everything in your life, for everyone in your life, and for the gift of you. Celebrate life!

If you have the chance to travel—take it! You will never regret it! My father always said that my decision to travel was the best decision I ever made! Savour the day!

Oh, yes ... and one other thing. Please do not make a significant decision based on the amount of money you have or—more likely—don't have. Please know that there is money here should you need it. Just let me know how I can help.

Much love to you dear daughter! You are in my thoughts and prayers always!