When I was a child, I liked to ask my father questions that I thought sounded cool, though I often didn’t even understand the question itself, much less the answer. I would ask him, “Are souls real?”, “Can you prove if a person is in love?”, and the (in my family) infamous, “But how do you *know* the floor is okay with me standing on it?!”. He would always humor me, laying out deep and expansive explanations for the simplest of queries. I like to think I inherited my father’s elegant way with words. He spent years describing to me worlds of splendor and mystery that neither of us were ever quite sure were not real. Only once did he give me an answer I understood completely, perhaps the only instance he took the time to make certain I understood what he was saying, and it’s become something I lead my life by.

Nine years ago, I spent the weekend at my father’s house. We decided to go fishing in the river, though neither of us were a big enough moron to try and eat anything caught from the Miami River. We set out early in the morning, packing together three enormous orange bags and made our way to the river’s shore. It was chilly by the water, and the shade from the trees didn’t help. The soil under our feet as we set up camp squished ever so quietly, forcing me to focus on my footing. It was perfect.

By the time we had everything set up, the sun was peeking over the horizon like a curious cat, watching silently as we settled in among the bugs and muck.

“Might be too late for catfish…” my dad murmured to himself, squinting his near-black eyes into the water as if he could intimidate it into spilling its secrets onto the shore. I sometimes wondered if he could.

“That’s fine,” I replied, knowing full well he’d been talking to himself. “They’re freaky anyways.”

He laughed, not moving his gaze from the water but allowing the corners of his eyes to crinkle up. “You’re not wrong, Kiddo.”

Two hours later, my father had caught three fish, while I’d managed to capture a single smallmouth bass. He eyed the fish as I struggled to get the hook out of its mouth without causing extra damage. “How you even manage to catch anything pulling it around like that is beyond me. One day your luck might surpass my skill.” He reached over and took the fish from me, sliding the hook out smoothly.

As he set it gently back into the water, I exclaimed, “It’s not luck! I just catch the ones that want a challenge. Yours are lazy!”

My father just smirked and whipped his fishy hand off on my head, letting out more of his roaring laughter as I released an indignant squeal and tried to hit him. I was eventually satiated with a hot dog, raw and without a bun. We reclaimed our seats on the rocky shore, baited our hooks, and recast our lines.

The new silence was filled with the bubbling of the river as it brushed against our feet. There was no wind, no sounds of birds, and, most importantly, no people. My father often dragged me out to as remote of a place as we could get in an afternoon, and though this little tree alcove was a mere ten minutes from town, we were the only ones around. The peace lulled me into a comfortable daze, nearly putting me to sleep.

Not one to fall asleep and drop my pole into the water, I did my favorite activity – interrogating my dad with what I considered cool questions. “Dad, how do you know you’re alive?” The question was meant to be a simple one about the proof, or lack thereof, of reality. Instead, it seemed to strike a chord inside the man beside me, and he remained quiet for several seconds. I know now it’s likely because his sister had recently died, but in that moment, I sensed a tenseness in the air I’d never before felt around my father, and it unnerved me.

After a bit, he let out a quiet sigh and ran a hand through his thick, unkept hair. “Well, I guess I know I’m alive because you’re here.”

“I don’t get it.” This is the point that my father would usually laugh and tell me to just think about it for a while. He believed that I needed to reason through thoughts, even philosophical ones, on my own to truly understand what I believed. But this time was different. This time, he looked at the water in the way I often looked at him. There were questions rolling gently behind his eyes as he tried to think of how to articulate his thoughts.

He leaned over slightly to press his arm against mine. “Well, to be alive means to love. If you love something, you’re alive, one way or another. It can be anything – a person, a pet, an activity. As long as you love something, you’re alive. If there’s nothing in this world that you *really* love, you might as well be dead.”

It was a rather dark and gruesome thought to tell a child, and the embarrassed look that twisted his face a moment later showed he knew it. “The point is that I love you. I love you so much I could… I dunno, give you another hotdog?” I giggled, nuzzling into his arm like a praised puppy.

The conversation lighter after that, and we eventually dipped back into the serene silence that a quiet river can coax out of anyone.

Whenever I think of my dad, I try to think of this day – the day my father actually explained something to me, answered a question with the wholeness of his heart. I’m not nearly so eloquent with my words as he was, but I try to pass the feeling of that world we created onto the children in my life. I want to share with them the reality that can stem from a blind answer, and maybe someday also share with them a word or two that will inspire them to chase the things they love and truly live.

Word count : 1050