A Letter to Dylan About My Family

Dear Dylan,

I want to preface this letter by saying that I love my family. I love everyone in it so much. I love my Mom. I love my Dad. I love my brothers. Our hardships have only made us stronger together. And though we are going through a hard time right now, I love them as much if not more than I ever have.

To tell you about my family requires me to go back in time to my late childhood and my young adulthood.

When I was in middle school, my parents set me aside one night after I finished my homework and told me they needed to have a serious conversation. My dad was sitting with my mom on his side, she looked uncomfortable and sad.

My dad told me that my mom was an alcoholic, that she had a problem and an addiction, but that she was getting help. She was going to start going to a support group. Which is why she would be going away for a little bit, and she wouldn’t be around much for the things that I usually expected her to be around for.

At the time I didn’t really know what this meant, so I just said okay and cried a little bit because my mom was crying and so it felt like the right thing to do.

Fast forward a few years to when I entered high school. My parents and I had a very good relationship with each other while I grew up, better than my brothers had with them. Actually, Wesley’s relationship was so bad with my parents that when he moved out to college he refused to come home or see any of us for over 8 months. Eric’s relationship was bad with them too - but for different reasons, and he was always able to still make it work to keep them in his life.

As I finished high school, my brothers had moved out and so I was an only child with my parents for 2 years. During this time, it became very apparent to me that my parents marriage was falling apart.

My parents met at BYU in the 80’s, and did what all young Mormons at BYU who are dating do -- they got married a few days after graduation and started their lives together. However, the one thing that separated my mom and dad from the rest of the young newlyweds in Provo, Utah was that they weren’t having babies. In fact, them waiting until my mom was 29 to have children was a rare occurrence for any BYU couple. It’s because my mom didn’t want to have kids.

The short version of the story is that my parents got married too young, they got married without having had many adult life experiences, and they didn’t quite understand what they were getting into together or what they even wanted in marriage or in life.

My dad has done some shitty stuff to my mom. Including cheating, shaming her as an alcoholic, shaming her for being overweight, and generally being unsupportive of her.

My mom has also done some shitty stuff to my dad. Not explicitly though. Implicitly. I haven’t heard my mom say one good thing about my dad in over 4 years, if not more. Not one.

When I was in highschool, this became very apparent to me for the first time. My dad had done something shitty to my mom, probably cheating on her, and she was debating if she should divorce him. I begged her not to. I couldn’t handle the thought of them getting divorced. Actually, this was something that I had done since I was in the 2nd grade after their first big fight. I would hear that they wanted a divorce, then I would start bawling my eyes out and convince them to stay together.

In high school though, I was no longer bawling and sobbing to try to save their relationship. I was in my own relationship at this point, so I thought I could help my mom. She would approach me about her marriage troubles, and I would be there to support her. It became a regular ritual, sometimes nightly. Dad would be traveling, I would be finishing my homework, mom would be drunk and upset and start complaining and crying about my dad, and I would comfort her.

It happened again and again and again.

Until I was my mom’s therapist.

And until the drinking became a big problem again.

My dad had shamed my mom so much when she had first come clean about her struggles with alcohol that she felt too ashamed to go to him for help anymore. She started to hide her alcohol addiction. She would buy handles of hard alcohol, mostly whiskey from what I could smell on her breath, and she would hide them all over the house. Whenever she went missing for a little bit, I knew she was finding a way to drink without anyone knowing. She’d pour it into coffee mugs and water bottles and she thought she was so clever. She wasn’t. I *always* knew.

When she drank, she got sad and angry. When my dad was traveling for work, we would talk for hours about her problems with my dad and their marriage. I would comfort her. Then I would go upstairs to my room and I would cry myself to sleep.

I was the only one who could be there for my mom at this time. I figured that daughters are supposed to be their mother’s support system. My dad couldn’t be there for my mom because he was the one causing the problems for her. Eric wasn’t going to support mom because he was too busy being a big-time drug dealer and trying to not get sent to prison. Wesley wasn’t going to support my mom because he was so debilitatingly depressed that I remember a night when I tried calling him over and over and over again to try to tell him I loved him so that he wouldn’t kill himself.

We all have our baggage.

So there it is: My mom has struggled with alcoholism since I was a young girl. Eric has put himself into legal harm's way since I was in elementary school. Wesley at one point in his life was suicidal and has been consistently depressed since I can remember. My dad has been an awful husband to my mom. My dad also struggles with the worst depression I’ve ever seen that he will never talk to anyone about. And then there’s me. The glue that keeps the family together. The emotional punching bag. The youngest child. The only daughter. The one that needs to always be there for everyone else.

This has impacted my life heavily.

When I struggle with drug addiction, I hide it from my loved ones in the **same exact way that my mom does**.

When I am depressed, I isolate myself and refuse to get help in the **same exact way that my dad and my brother do.**

When I am feeling reckless, I think of no one else but myself in the **same exact way that my brother does**.

When I struggle with my eating disorder, I beat myself up in the **same exact way that my mom taught me to.**

These experiences have shaped who I am and they continue to shape my emotions, my habits, and my future. Sometimes in small ways that I can manage. Sometimes in debilitating ways that I have no control over.

It’s hard to not blame myself for how bad it got with my mom. All the nights that I knew she was drinking, and I never said anything. All of the days I saw her come home with a hidden brown paper bag, and I never stopped her. I know it isn’t my fault, but it’s hard to not wonder *what if.*

It took me years to finally talk with my mom about how I knew about her alcoholism. I told her at the same time that I told her I had an eating disorder and a drug addiction of my own. We cried and talked it through. We became closer. Then things started to get much better.

Actually, for the last year things have arguably been great.

My mom decided last Labor day to go sober for the first time since her days of being Mormon for 30 days. She didn’t tell anyone. Until it turned into 60 days. At my grandfather’s funeral last year, she finally told me she was sober and she was going to see how long she could do it for. Her goal was to make it to 100 days.

I was so happy for her. I’ve never felt so happy and proud of my mom.

She didn’t want to tell my dad because she didn’t want him to ruin it for her by making her feel ashamed of herself. But she told my brothers and I. We kept her secret. Whatever it would take to support her sobriety.

Her sobriety influenced me in incredibly positive ways. I decided to go sober too. Not entirely because of my mom, but knowing that my mom could do it too made it easier for me.

So both my mom and I were sober for a large part of 2020. I made it until mid-May, my mom didn’t make it quite that far.

Then, when we broke our hundreds of days of sobriety… we went right back to where we were before. Overusing, abusing, and hiding it all from our loved ones.

I knew I needed to be there to support my mom. I knew I needed to go home. So I did.

The first week back home was *rough*. The last time I had seen my mom was when she was sober and she had been doing so great. When I moved home to surprise her on mother’s day of this year and I saw her for the first time… I saw it in her eyes immediately. I judged her so much for giving into her addiction again.

Then, ironically, I went down to my basement room, and for two weeks straight -- I gave into my addiction too. Weed was the drug of choice, and I smoked all day, every day.

Going home was like a slap in the face of reality.

Eric was unemployed, broke, being abused by my dad for going nowhere with his career.

Wesley was depressed, angry, and taking it out on everyone around him.

Dad was depressed, still grieving his mother who died just one short month before, but not allowing himself to feel the grief and so instead he pushed it down with exercise and control over Eric.

Mom was a secret alcoholic again, denying it to me and my brothers and taking out all of her anger on her marriage.

It was *rough*.

Then, the weeks passed, the fog cleared, I found some healthy boundaries with weed, and the family found a nice rhythm.

The summer began to pass quickly. We were all happy with one another. Finally.

*Finally.*

My coming home had done the job. I had mended the breaks in the family. I helped everyone work through their hardships. We were better. In fact, we were seemingly *great*.

**And then my dad almost died.**

My mom called me sobbing, not knowing if he was going to live.

When I finally got back to Utah, when we knew he was going to make it, things were not what I expected to see.

Eric, Wesley, and my mom were **mad**. They were furious at my dad. Within 3 hours of me being home, I had at different points emotionally supported, held, and cried with my mom and my two brothers separately over how angry at my dad they were:

*How selfish of him to not think about our family and what would happen to us if he died. Doesn’t he know he can’t get life insurance as a paraglider? If he was to die, we would have to sell the house and our belongings and my mom would have to work until she was in her 80’s.*

*How selfish of him to have made all of the financial mistakes he made 10 years ago. To have bankrupt my family and to have spent all of my mom’s savings for his own ventures. To have held the financial power over my mom for decades until she felt powerless as a wife, as a woman, and as a family member. And now, to risk threatening the first feeling of financial security she’s ever felt by almost dying.*

*How selfish of him to not think that his extreme sports and recklessness have an impact on our family. How selfish of him to joke about returning to the sport immediately after his surgery is over.*

*How selfish of him to introduce Wesley to flying when he was depressed and suicidal, show Wesley a sport that saved his life and ultimately became one of the biggest parts of his identity, to give him that happy place, and then to ruin every bit of happiness that was associated with that place until it left Wesley cold, bitter, and empty.*

So yes, my family was mad.

Meanwhile, I was sobbing alone. Grateful to the universe for saving my dad. For letting him live. My gratitude was greatly juxtaposed with the anger.

I should mention that everyone else was grateful too. But they were also angry.

My mom was especially so.

She checked out of the family for the five days after my dad came back from surgery.

She slept in a different room than my dad. She refused to talk to him or engage with him. Whenever she did, they would fight. My dad was on narcotics so the fights were even worse. She left the house at 6 am and came back at 10pm. She didn’t take care of him or check in on him or ask how he was doing.

Instead, my brothers and I took care of him. I took the lead.

That week, there was more fighting and tears and distress than I’ve felt in any other week of my life. But there were also moments with my dad that were more beautiful and vulnerable than anything I’ve ever felt before.

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When my mom finally returned to us five days later, my brothers were angry with her. They were angry with how she was acting as a mother, and angry with how she was acting as a wife.

My mom was still angry at my dad.

I was simultaneously allowing my brothers to use me as a shoulder to cry on to complain about my mom while allowing my mom to use me as a shoulder to cry on to complain about my dad, all while taking care of my dad and making sure that I didn’t kill him by mixing the wrong drugs, and being his main source of help in his recovery.

*Then I got angry.*

My mom approached me on the morning of day 6 and started to complain about my dad, so I told her frankly that she either needed to go to couples therapy or get a divorce.

It was the first time in my life I had ever told my mom to get a divorce instead of the opposite.

We had an intense and long discussion. I didn’t hold back.

I told her that I didn’t think she had loved my dad for years. I told her that recently I had been wondering if she actually *hated* my dad. I told her how her relationship with my dad fucked me up and how it influences my inability to fully love someone or be in a long-lasting relationship or want to have kids. She told me she never wanted to have kids in the first place. She told me that at times she wishes she was an orphan and didn’t have to be a part of the family. I told her that I couldn’t be her marriage counselor anymore, and that if she didn’t find one, I couldn’t be a part of the family anymore. She told me how much dad had fucked her up. I told her that it was okay if she decided she needed to leave him.

I told her I knew she had been struggling with her alcohol addiction all summer. I told her I had been struggling all summer too. She told me she was planning on going sober again this labor day… ironically, that’s the same day I am writing this letter. I hope she was being honest.

The last week of me being home put every major problem my family has been pushing under the rug right in front of us and slapped us in the face with it. My desperate attempt to solve everything in my family while I was home was laughed at by the universe as it catapulted my dad’s limp body 150 feet down to the ground.

Everything I ever did and did not want to confront in regards to my family was forced to be confronted for once and for all… and I confronted it.

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So that’s what has been going on in my life in regards to my family.

This story is obviously not all-encompassing. I have by no means shared everything here. However, I have shared quite a bit, and I think I have now finally shared enough for you to at least understand the biggest pieces of this puzzle.

I suppose it’s a good idea for me to end this on a hopeful note.

My dad is recovering and indicating that he might have a new relationship with risk now.

My mom is hopefully going to become sober again today.

Wesley is moving back to Colombia, finding new hobbies, and sounding happy again.

Eric has a job, finally has power over my dad, and is happy.

My brothers and I are closer than we’ve ever been, and have an incredibly happy and healthy relationship with each other.

My mom and I finally hashed out the anger I’ve felt towards her using me as a marriage counselor for years.

Now I just have to wait. I have to wait to see if my mom and my dad are willing to find a therapist together. I have to wait to see if my dad is capable of battling his depression without the release of adrenaline. I have to wait to see if Wesley and Eric can amend their relationship with my dad and with my mom. I have to wait to see what happens to our family. I have to wait to see if we all will stay together or split into pieces. I have to wait.

In the meantime, I’m just processing. All of it. I consider myself lucky. My family is all alive. We all have a house and money to live off of. And I love every single one of them so goddamn much.

So there you have it. That’s my family. That’s me.