

# IMMERSE

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## A Letter to my Parents (and parents everywhere)

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Dear Mom and Dad,

First off, thank you. You have played (and continue to play) a role in my life like none other. You have known me longer than anyone else (my whole life!) and in some ways you've known me closer than anyone else (dirty diapers, temper tantrums, etc.). For all of that and more, thank you.

But more than simply maintaining my existence and cleaning me up along the way, you have been an essential part of my ongoing spiritual formation and development.

### **What You Did**

You gave me my first Bible and even sat down to read it with me. You even showed me where the book of James was. It was my favorite book until I realized it wasn't named after me. Years later when I was ready to "get serious" about studying the Bible, you bought me another one (and this one wasn't cheap, I saw your face when you turned over the box).

You sat by me in church and taught me to participate in the worship gathering. From turning pages in a hymnal to praying silently and aloud, I can still recite prayers and creeds and know my way around a liturgy, all because of you.

We would have family devotions and light advent candles and sing cheesy songs. You would pray with me nearly every night and let me ask you any question (including the night where I realized what I felt beneath

my skinny chest was my sternum, not an upside down heart; what a relief to a seven-year-old).

You took me to youth group, starting in 5<sup>th</sup> grade, and let me go with friends to their church's youth group and events. When I was old enough to drive you let me spend late nights at other Bible studies and church events, journeying with friends and other adults. And in a non-helicopter-parent way, you even got to know my friends and the other adults who were leading youth group and Bible study.

Throughout all of this, you were there. You empowered my faith and helped me articulate a language of faith. Whether you knew it or not, you were the most influential and formative presence in my faith journey. And you should be proud.

### **What I Wish You Did**

Looking back on it all, in some ways I wish you had done more.

Eventually our family devotions ended. And as much as I was glad to be done with the cheesy songs (Seriously Dad, when did you learn them? Oh yeah, the 60s.) I would have enjoyed structured space to continue sharing questions. I love to ask mine and I would even have loved to hear yours! I know the dinner table turned into a fleeting object as my life filled up with high school activities, but what about car rides together or family vacations or notes to each other on the fridge? You helped me start my journey of questioning everything in order to hold onto that which is good. And looking back, I wish there had been more. (You never know, I may have had a thing or two to teach you!)

We always sat together in church on Sundays, but we never talked much about what the sermon or the worship gathering. Maybe this is because we were all so involved in helping out on Sundays that we thought we would be simply talking about our own thing. But in some ways it felt like we had a shared spiritual experience each week but then left it at the door due to the demands of Sunday school classes, church meetings, or other Sunday events. What would it have looked like to share a "from me to you" moment each week, pulling the curtain back another inch to reveal the formation happening within each of us?

And I know we were always busy working in and with the church, but I wish we had done more to serve together, both in and out of the church. What if our family ritual for holidays wasn't to eat food around our table, but to serve it to those who don't have one? What if we had traveled together, encountering life-changing and faith-shaping experiences together? The rituals we had shaped me (and continue to shape me, years later), but what else could we have done? Something as simple as Sunday morning breakfast together (which would have required you taking the sports and comic section away from me) would have helped make this possible.

In so many ways, I value what we had. But in the same breath, I wish there had been more.

### **Family Style Faith**

Don't think I'm forgetting all the moments in between. I was your "typical" teenager and you were the "unfair" parents (when in reality there is nothing "typical" about any teenager and "unfair" is an unfair label to give any parent). We had plenty of moments fighting and arguing about cars and curfews (and even a few arguments about faith). But as I look back now, I realize now just how much you helped me articulate and express a language of faith. This is a language I continue to learn and develop today. I could not have done it alone then and I cannot do it alone today. Thank you for the role you played and continue to play in my life and my faith.

Your son,

Jim

p.s. If there are any other parents (or people who work with parents) reading this, the role a family plays in faith development is crucial. Parents are the most formative influence in a young person's life, for both good and bad. Be aware of and intentional about what you are (and aren't) doing. Continue articulating and expressing your own language of faith and help your son or daughter do the same.