

To my younger self:

Dear V,

I am writing this letter to you, in "the eternal now", knowing that time is a human construct. In a deep sense we are interacting with one another today in a time warp.¹ Whoever would have thought?!?

I believe the long and loving look back that I am extending to you today, somehow touches your life back then, and strengthens you for the years ahead. I also believe that in imaginatively visiting you in the past, I can somehow further integrate your youthful energy and endless potential into my present days. So there is a wonderful reciprocity in our exchange. In this moment, there is no separation between remembered and present versions of myself. You, my younger self, live within me still as an earlier expression of my being and a promise for the future. And I, your older self, lived within you then, as a hope towards which you were becoming, a beacon for your days.

Through the complex lattice of memory I see you young again. Back then, your focus was mostly on the future, on the great adventures that lay before you. Today, much of your life is behind you. I so much want you to keep going to the very end of your life with joy and with wonder, with determination and trust. And for that I, your older self, need you still.

I am looking at a photo of you taken on the day you graduated from Teacher's College. I see an intensity and purposefulness in you that for me is both a moment of pride, and a moment of heart break. I am so proud of you and the "work of art" you are making of your life.² I also feel a certain sadness, because I now know that your life will soon be shaken and shattered, and I want to protect you from such pain, to nourish your life in every way possible.

So in that desire, I say this to you, and wrap you in the love that moves me to speak:

- Believe in yourself. Beyond the doubts and broken dreams, believe in yourself. Beyond the ways you fail, believe in yourself. Beyond the ways you

¹ (General Physics) a hypothetical distortion of time in which people and events from one age can be imagined to exist in another age. [Collins English Dictionary – Complete and Unabridged](#). HarperCollins Publishers 2003. Accessed at: <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/time+warp>

² Ehesians 2:10. "For we are God's work of art..."

succeed, believe in yourself. Beyond the hurt and struggle, believe in yourself. Beyond the joys and adventures, believe in yourself. Beyond lost feelings and ecstatic moments, believe in yourself. There are times when this act of faith will take all of your courage and all of your endurance and you must continue to believe.

- Welcome new experiences and challenges. They are going to come anyway, and if you welcome them, you will be better able to negotiate them. Taste them, struggle with them, enjoy them and let them disclose further truths about who you are, what life is, who God is.
- Be prepared to make mistakes, and make them whole-heartedly. While scary and humiliating, mistakes are portals of new learning. And for the kind of world you want to be part of, you need the largesse they will bring.
- Don't hold on to grudges. Forgive hurts and betrayals that come your way. There is no "cheap forgiveness", and it will cost you. However as Anne Lamott says, "not forgiving is like drinking rat poison and then waiting for the rat to die."³ It's a waste of the days of your life. Forgiving freely is an important struggle and is transformative in its own right. Find the courage and generosity to forgive. Seventy times seven.⁴
- When you are afraid, act as if you have courage, and courage will be given to you.
- Practice gratitude. It will draw you to God in deep ways, and open you to more of life.

Weeks after your graduation your alcoholic father will commit suicide. You will begin teaching, which will open you to a life-long love of learning. You will struggle with your vocation to religious life, and you will "live the questions" with all the integrity you can muster. You will enter into a period of emotional upheaval and doubt that will last for several years and culminate in you accepting your own alcoholism. This will seem like a terrible failure at the time, and it will open you to a whole renewal of life and spirit that continues to this day. You will work professionally with addicts and their families. You will be a missionary in Africa. Your work with the Sisters will take you to many places on earth, and each of them will enlarge your life. You will meet some superb people and make some magnificent friends. You will live through cancer. Family members and friends will die. You will

³ Anne Lamott. *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1999.

⁴ Matthew 18.22.

earn a doctorate. You will have a heart attack. Like Jacob, you will walk away from your struggles limping - and you will learn to dance with that limp.⁵

If you had known "back then" all that would transpire in your life, it would have been overwhelming. Mercifully, you learned fairly early the wisdom of living one day at a time, and knowing that you will always have the grace in the present to handle whatever comes your way - even though it may not feel like you do. You have all the resources you need for living in perilous times.

You entered religious life as a way of growing closer to God and being of service to people. You wanted your life to have meaning and purpose. You wanted to be happy. You wanted it to matter that you had lived on this earth, that you had contributed something fine.

And your hope will not be disappointed. Religious life for you will be a more wonderful and a more difficult path than you ever imagined it those many years ago. Your vocation as an RNDM will indeed give you a way to know God, to know your heart, to know others, to integrate your sexuality, to detach from power, possessions and prestige, to work for justice, to live in community, to be part of something larger than yourself. Religious life will be a transformative path for you and give you a life of astonishing beauty.

So take heart dear younger self, and continue on your way with courage and joy. I, your elder counterpart, am refreshed and strengthened by our companionship. Without recognizing it, we have accompanied one another over these many years, and we will complete this remarkable journey together. Glory be! "As it was in the beginning, is now, and shall be forever ..."

Much love -

V (the elder)

Veronica Dunne

⁵ Genesis 32:28-31