

Upfront

My daughter declared that she was driving (back) to Dallas by way of Oxford, Mississippi. The upside for her: She'd have her car at school for the second semester of her senior year. The fallout for me: I would worry uncontrollably for the two days that she'd be on the road and, to a lesser degree, some part of each day hence until the Ford was in front of my house again.

Typically, I employ a simple sniff test to decide how actively I oppose such ideas: What would my own parents think/say/do? I recognize that this hypothetical criterion is insidiously fluid. The older my mom and dad get, the lower their tolerance for risk and of my acceptance of same, particularly as it pertains to my permissive parenting. Still, WWMADS (What would Mom and Dad say?) – even if the implicit answer skews too conservative – is a useful baseline to inform my Dad-work. In the case of allowing Gabby, alone in her very imperfect car, to make her second 16-hour road trip in less than a month, I'm certain they'd say NFW, in more delicate language, of course.

As small consolation (which would prove to be an amazing stroke of good fortune), Gabby said she was caravanning – at least for the Savannah-to-Oxford leg – with Kirby, who would be piloting her own car. On the morning of, she told me they were grabbing breakfast and heading out. It was around 9, so allocating an hour for an omelet, a few cups of coffee, and more girl-gossip than I'd be comfortable with, I projected an ETA of something close to 10. I've never driven to Oxford, but I had the idea of eight hours in my head. I kissed Gabby goodbye and implored her to call me when she arrived safely, and, sure enough, my phone rang a little after 6.

"Is everything okay?"

"No." Which is the single worst word for the circumstance, and gateway to a storehouse of horrific images hidden in the darkest, most fear-laden crevasse in my mind.

She was "in a ditch," with "mud everywhere," and "the car wouldn't move," its engine, when ignited, made a "horrible sound," and "I'm not sure, but we're probably near Tupelo," was less precise location data than I would have liked.

"What happened?" A question for which its answer I did not wait. Rather, I pushed on in interrogation, laced with annoyed and unconstructive barbs.

"It could have been really bad," she said with both frustration and sadness as she described losing drive-train power halfway across a busy interchange. I felt like a jerk.

A bunch of phone calls filling the subsequent 24-hour span, and she made Dallas, albeit by air, in time for another flight to Taos and the start of a compact winter term.

The next night, I got another call from Gabby that I missed because I was working on edits for this magazine. Back-to-back-to-back phone days aren't a usual thing. As soon as I noticed her name in red, I dialed her back. Her voice seemed to announce the tears that I, right away, knew were filling her eyes. Something unexpected and sad ruined her night, and probably most, if not all, nights for the next few weeks.

"What happened?" This time, unlike with the car issue, I let the dead air linger in spite of the crushing discomfort that such silence yields.

Eventually, she revealed the source of her sorrow; but, it was clear that she didn't accept the logic behind the decisions that led her to pain. Still, she seemed reconciled to the truth that she could do nothing to fix her misery in the moment, a fact that made me feel rage and impotence, at once.

I offered no solutions, no sage advice. In fact, I was kind of tongue-tied. At one point I said, probably self-indulgently: "These are the times when you probably wish your mom was still around."

To my surprise, Gabby replied, mercifully and sincere: "I don't think she would have had anything better to say than you (do)."

At that moment, I remembered what my girls had screamed into my forever-psyche on a harsh December night four years ago: "Sometimes, we just want you to listen... Mom didn't always have to rush to try to fix everything."

So, I said nothing. We were quiet. Gabby sobbed noticeably, and the awkward silence wasn't awkward at all.

By letting go of the compulsion to control my universe – through surrender – I had reasonably navigated a moment that could have gotten a lot worse. My kids have taught me that being a good dad sometimes requires being a good mom, instead. And a good mom listens, and has the humility to say nothing, when nothing is exactly the right thing to say.

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