

Dear Dad

Dear Dad I

Love you I

Like your name

Your nice.

Love, Clare

Sarah Kate and

Amy

This letter from my daughters (Anne arrived on the scene five years after Amy) has followed me from place to place, office to office, and is currently pinned to my half of the bulletin board in our home office.

It was printed in pencil on a lined page in a small, pocket-size spiral notebook, and then ripped out for presentation. I do not remember its date of origin or the occasion that prompted it, but I place the year at 1972, when Clare was attending kindergarten in Inglewood, a short block away from our farmworker boycott residence, a former parsonage located directly beneath the flight pattern serving LAX.

I have many such letters, and not only from their childhood years, but from their growing-up and adult years as well. I have carried one such letter in my wallet now going on five years. I read it only occasionally, but I feel comfortable knowing it is close at hand and can be reread any time I wish.

Some of the letters from my children have been deposited in my bureau, others in the rear of the desk drawer, still others in the back of the file cabinet, and apparently some can even be found in a file box stored in the garage cupboards, because not long ago I was rummaging through a box looking for ancestral photographs, and I found some there.

What is a father supposed to do with such letters? If it had been a bouquet of flowers for a special occasion or a box of candy, the decision would be much easier: the flowers die, the candy is eaten, it is over. If it were a work of art dedicated to me, it would have been added to the temporary exhibition gallery on the refrigerator, or if it had been a handmade holiday gift from school, it could be set on a shelf somewhere. But for me, a handwritten letter from my children has no prescribed life span or specific location. It is meant to be read and saved, but for what? For how long? I don't know, but am I just to toss it? I don't think so.

What will happen to these letters, do you think? I suppose my children, or at least some of them, will gather after I have eternally departed and go through my stuff. When they come across these letters which they themselves have authored, will they cluck, "I just can't believe that Dad kept all this stuff, what was he planning to do with it?" Or, "Good Lord, didn't he ever throw anything out? What are we supposed to do with them?" Good question.

Or will they marvel, "I am so glad Dad saved this letter, I remember when I wrote it to him." Or, "Can you believe how much Dad cared about us, saving an old letter like this?" I think it likely this is wishful thinking on my part or even a thinly veiled rationale to justify my inability and/or unwillingness to make a firm decision about disposing of these letters.

Maybe I should have organized them into a scrapbook and then . . . then what? For one thing, which of my five children would inherit it? What would she do with it? I could make five scrapbooks, which means each one would feel obligated to save it until her own children didn't know what to do with them. After all, there is no national library dedicated to saving children's letters written to dad.

No, these letters are not about my children, they are about me. The only value they have is the value that I, and I alone, give them. I am unable to dispose of them, but after I am disposed of, they should be tossed into the fire, too.