

Twenty Years Later—Letter to My Mother

Hello Ma,

It has been twenty years since you died. There are times when it only seems like yesterday. I have so much I want to say to you. First, let me tell you about Atiya. She is your granddaughter. What a joy. She would have made you so happy. You and Norma would probably be fighting over her.

Traci and I are still together. I know you probably had your doubts about me. She has stuck with me even when she had reasons to leave. I sometimes feel I have not fulfilled the promises of our unspoken prenuptial agreement. By the way, Traci truly loves you. Yeah, Atiya loves you, too. She even talks about conversations she has with you. That's between you and her.

Ma, would you believe I became a teacher? I know this brings you both joy and surprise. You must be laughing because of all the hell I caused my teachers. I also decided to become a school principal.

I love you. I love you everyday. I hope to make up for all the days I failed to say "I love you." Do you remember the first time I said it to you? I think I was in college. I loved you all of my life. I just did not know how to tell you. I know my behavior said other things, especially, "I don't care!"

I wish you had a chance to visit Las Vegas. Your doctors did not think it was a good idea for you to travel. I wanted to give you so many things. I definitely wanted to buy you a house. You deserved a home of your own. I always wanted to ask you how you managed to take care of your seven children, your mother, and every cousin who visited from the South. You even welcomed strangers into our house and treated them like family. Why? I know it was godly.

Speaking of God, I long to hear you sing your religious songs. "What a friend we have in Jesus ..." I used to notice you writing verses from the Bible. Was that your way of practicing your writing? I was convinced you loved God. At the time, I was not convinced that God loved you. Now I know he did. When I look at Atiya, I realize that, without you, there would be no her.

Ma, I have so many of your habits. I get up early every morning. I seem to worry about everything. I try to take care of everybody, but it's definitely not to the same degree as you did.

Ma, I apologize for all of the nights I stayed out without you knowing my whereabouts. I now know that, every time you heard a siren, you thought they were going after me. Every time you heard a gunshot or smash of a bottle, I know you thought it was meant for me. I wish I could make up for all of the hours you spent at the window waiting for me to come home in the early morning hours. I sincerely apologize for the pounds of aggravation I caused you. I do not know what possessed me to act in such ways. Whether it was in school or the judicial system, I did not realize the embarrassment I caused you, visit after visit. God, what those people must have thought of you. I feel sorry for parents when they visit me regarding their misbehaving children. I think of you each time.

What I would give to see you walking down the street pushing your shopping cart full of welfare food: powdered eggs, cheese, and butter. I was embarrassed when you asked me to help you carry the food to the house. What I would not give to see you now.

Ma, your cooking is legendary. We still talk about your fried chicken and potato salad. I think you have inspired Traci and Denise. They would proudly submit that they can only come close.

Do you remember when Randy, Eleanor, and I were arguing over who should get to lick the cake bowl? You became so frustrated that you threw the cake out of the window. That shocked the hell out of us. I was so tempted to go outside, kiss the cake up to God, and eat it anyway. We sit around now and laugh at our foolishness. I find myself saying things you said to us to Atiya. "Atiya, I will throw that ice cream away if you are not grateful!"

Ma, it's wild that I waited until you died to ask a thousand questions about your life. I want to know so much about you. Actually, I want the world to know about your generosity and tenacity.

I hope you are not upset that I am trying to get information on the white man who raped you when you were seventeen. I just found out that you were pregnant with Cass when he did that to you. I love you

so much.

Thank you for not parading men in and out of my life and having me call someone "Daddy." All I know about my biological father is that you loved him. That is good enough for me. If you loved him, I could not hate anything you loved. For years, I told myself it did not matter if I knew my father. After forty-two years of life, I have finally come to believe that my father in my life could have made a difference. I think about this when I look at my relationship with Atiya. I could not imagine life without being in her life.

Ma, I often tell the story how I did not go to the graduation ceremony in Albany. In hindsight, I should have attended for you. I missed the opportunity to see you cry tears of joy. I remember your crying face at LeMoynes graduation. You were so proud. You must have recounted all the times you came to the precinct to pick me up and all the nights I defiantly did not come home, just because I wanted to hang with the fellas a little longer. What I would not do to take back all of that foolishness.

You give me so much strength. In your memory, I have devoted my life to serving others, particularly our children. I want to spare many mothers the pain and suffering you so aptly endured.

You never stopped loving us, even when our actions seemed to reject your love.

Ma, when I see parents struggling with their children, especially their boys, I often think of you. I actually feel pain because I know you went through the same struggles with me. I guess that's, in part, why I work so hard to help develop young boys today.

By Bernard Gassaway

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