

The Power of "I Like It"

I was thirteen years old. At that age I wasn't familiar with the term, bombed, as in what happens when you tell a joke and your audience doesn't laugh.

But I knew the feeling, though I couldn't put a word to it.

I'd just come in from gazing at the night sky from the backyard of our home in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada mountains. Inside, my divorced mother and some of her friends were talking with my visiting grandmother.

A strange child (but aren't all children?), I spent a lot of time by myself. I was like other kids in many regards, yet had inherited my mother's unusually intense desire to fathom both the scientific and philosophical mysteries of the cosmos.

So I'd stood outside for a while, then sat at my beloved roll-top desk and wrote a poem. In prose form, here it is:

"Look up to the heavens. What is there? Tiny pinpoints of light. But is that all? Look past the stars into the blackness of the void. What lies there, waiting for man's first faltering steps into the darkness of the universe? What unknown mysteries lie where human eyes cannot see? In the darkness of the void, perhaps there are things we should not know, and not find out."

The poem still sends a chill up my spine. At thirteen, I'd tried to speak about something unspeakable. At sixty-six, I still am.

I walked into the living room where the adults were chatting. Holding the scrap of paper I'd written the poem on, I read it aloud. What I got back was...

Silence.

Fitting, perhaps, since I'd spoken about the void. Yet I felt awkward. I'd just spoken my truth to people I cared about. What felt so meaningful to me seemed to mean nothing to them.

Then my grandmother said, “I like it.” Writing those three words just unexpectedly brought tears to my eyes. I knew they meant a lot to me. Until now I didn’t know how much.

Everything changed with that “I like it.” I didn’t care if nobody else liked my poem. I did. My grandmother did. Two is a crowd, but one is a lonely number.

We need people to affirm our strangeness. We humans are social creatures. From birth we’re wired to reach out and enjoy touching others, while they touch us.

Eva, my maternal grandmother, was a larger-than-life person to me.

She grew up in New Mexico. She wore dramatic Hopi jewelry, big turquoise-encrusted necklaces and bracelets. She was into organic gardening in the 1950s. She bought one of the first Volkswagens imported into the United States. She was a character, a musician and artist, an outspoken freethinker. And she liked my poem!

By “larger-than-life” I really mean this: my grandmother was truly alive. Most of us aren’t. She wasn’t enlarged. We are shrunken. Because we so often fail to trust ourselves, to express ourselves, to say “I like it.”

Strange Up Salem seeks to lift our city’s Blah Curse. Give us a Facebook like. Brian Hines blogs at hinesblog.com