

What if?

One of the finest human beings I ever knew was a man named Joe. Joe was in his mid-80s when I first met him. He and his wife lived in the modest, well-kept home they'd bought early in their marriage – the home in which they'd raised their children, and loved to gather in their grandchildren and great-grandchildren. To this day, Joe is one of the nicest, kindest, gentlest, friendliest men I've ever known. When people meet Joe, they know they've found a friend. When you spend time talking with Joe, you always end up feeling better than when you started. He is just a great guy.

But he could have become someone very different.

You see, Joe's mom died when he was about twelve years old. And a few years later, his dad became extremely ill – so much so that he was bedridden and unable to work. Because they had no other family, and because it was the height of the Great Depression, Joe he had no choice. At the young age of fourteen, Joe was forced to quit school so that he could get a job and keep food on the table. And by the age of sixteen, Joe was an orphan. He spent the rest of his teen years wandering alone from town to town, surviving on odd jobs and the compassion of kind-hearted people.

Life knocked Joe down more in his first sixteen years than many of us experience in our entire lifetime. And Joe will be the first to say that during those years he was angry and upset and filled with sadness and grief. But even then, he held tightly onto something his dad had told him: “Joe, your mom didn't want to leave you. She loved you so much, that she would have stayed with you if she could have. But she's gone. We can't get her back. So now I want you to think about all the things she taught you, and all the things she did for you, and all the ways she showed you that she loved you. Because all of those things are still true, and still alive in you. Your mom is in heaven, and she doesn't want you to have a bad life because you're sad that she's gone. I know you're sad, but you can still have a good life. You can still have fun with your friends, and learn things in school, and laugh at jokes, and read good books, and eat good food, and have a good life, because your mom would still want you to. It's ok to be happy and to be a good person, Joe, no matter what.” Those words made a powerful impression on Joe, and because of them he decided that it would make his mom happy, and his dad happy, and it would make *himself* happy if he tried his best to become a thoughtful, friendly, caring and compassionate person – the kind of person his parents had taught him to be. The kind of person he is.

But *what if?* What if Joe's dad hadn't planted that vision within him? What if Joe hadn't accepted that vision as his own? What if he had given in to fear and anger, instead of choosing kindness and caring? What if he hadn't become one of the finest people I have ever had the honor of knowing? And what if we all pondered the lessons of Joe's stories, and what they could mean in our own lives?

God bless you.

Tamara