

Dear Sierra,

Saturday  
April 25, 2015

It's hard to believe, but this coming Thursday marks the beginning of your 16th year in this world. It's an important milestone for you, and for a number of reasons. There's the blatantly obvious, which is getting your drivers license, the first, and some would argue, the single most important step towards a teenager's growing sense of independence. However, we tend to become so focused on the obvious that we completely overlook the small, and often hidden things in life, and these are the things that usually end up hurting us the most, and when we least expect it.

This year marks the official start in your journey towards becoming an adult, and as exciting as that prospect may at first appear, it's also filled with responsibilities and pitfalls that often overwhelm the unprepared. Think about it like this: choosing the right thing to eat, or not to eat, can not only affect your day today, it can also have a lasting impact felt decades later. Maybe we skipped a meal because we were in a hurry, and before you know it, we don't even bother with breakfast, the single most important meal of the day. Or maybe we make the attempt, but again, we were so busy that we just didn't take out the time to eat right, snatching the first, calorie laden thing that appealed to us. That decision inevitably leads to not exercising, and together, these factors lead to being overweight, diabetes, heart problems, and eventually death. Your choices in the coming year are very much the same, so don't rush through things. Take a moment and think about the consequences of your actions, good and bad, immediate and long term. I wish I'd done that, because if I had, then I certainly wouldn't be sitting behind bars right now, crying myself to sleep because I've yet to speak with my daughter, much less see her.

If I could only teach you one thing, it would be this: don't make the mistake of learning your lessons the hard way, as a result of **you** making the mistake. Instead, learn your lessons from the mistakes others have made. I guarantee you, there's not one thing you could ever make that someone else hasn't already done, so look around, ask questions, get the facts, and **then** make up your mind about what you want to do. I promise you that, if you do, your life will be **so** much better than mine ever was, and at the end of the day, that's all a parent ever truly wants for their child: for them to be **better**, to **do** better.

That being said, answer a question for me: what do you think is the biggest mistake I ever made in life? Not knowing anything at all about me (other than the obvious fact that I'm in prison), I'd be willing to bet you said it had something to do with committing a crime, and nothing could be farther from the truth. Don't get me wrong, committing crimes are **definitely** huge mistakes on my part - even if I do dispute the accuracy, or number, of my accusations - but my crimes were just an inevitable consequence of the choices I made as a child, mainly, my choice of friends.

As an adult, we don't always know what's best for us, no matter what we say to the contrary, but as children, this is even more true, and more frequently. As children, we have a tendency to look at the here and now, especially in a modern world of the Internet's instant gratification. Children simply can't comprehend the long term effects that their actions are going to have, possibly because they haven't lived long enough to understand what long term effects truly are. Regardless, this is why it falls on the parent or guardian, the adult in the situation, to help the child make those decisions until they can comprehend the short and long term consequences, good and bad, of their actions. For me, this was something that I had neither the time, the patience nor the willingness to even bother trying to understand. As a child in an extremely abusive home situation, I just **knew** that every decision my mother made was wrong, so I stopped listening. Before long, I was hanging out with others who felt and acted the same as I did about my situation. As if this wasn't bad enough, these were almost always people who were much older than I, kids and adults, and like any younger kid trying to impress his newfound, and older, friends, I was quick to say and do just about anything to try to fit in. Completely lacking any sense or morals or responsibility, they were quick to use this to their advantage, asking me to do things even they weren't willing to do, and even though I knew what I was doing was wrong, I did it anyway, choosing this to continuing to live in an abusive home environment.

It's important for you to know and understand that I'm not, in any way, shape or form, trying to **blame** any of these people for the decisions I made, either then, or later in the future. From day one, I had a choice, and I, and I alone, chose to hang around them, knowing full well that they were up to no good, that they were just using me and that what I was doing was wrong. I willingly made this choice, even though I'd later try to convince myself, and others, that this really wasn't a choice, given the alternate, but a choice it was, and it's a choice that I not only made, but one which I ultimately suffered the consequences for, as proven by my current state of incarceration.

I tell you about this because my path today is a direct result of the decisions I made when I was your age. Sixteen years old is well on the way towards becoming an adult, but still highly impressionable, and there are plenty of people who are well aware of this fact, and who will use it to their advantage, regardless of how it affects you. Be wary of your choices in the coming year, not just because of the harm it might cause you here and now, but also because of the potential for harm years down the road. You think you've been through so much already, and already handled it far better than I ever did, it would be a shame to give it all up because of a poor series of decisions made now, which is why I ask you, I beg you: pick your friends with utmost care. The people you hang around with today are going to determine, in large part, the kind of person you become later in life. Most, if not all, of the people I considered friends as a child ended up in jail, prison or dead, and for good reason. I **don't** want to see that happen to you, which is why I'm telling you now: the single largest mistake I **ever** made was in my choice of friends as a child. If I could go back and do one thing over, it would be to choose different friends. Good friends, positive friends, have the potential to pull you up, but bad friends, negative friends, will **always** pull you down into the very bowels of hell if you let them.

Still, you should know that, even the best, most positive of friends isn't going to make the right decision all the time. When that day comes, and it will, you need to be strong enough to stand up for what's right, even if that means losing a friend. The closer you are to them and the more intent they are on doing wrong, the more difficult it's going to be, but you need to muster up the courage to do what's right. I promise you that, sooner or later, you'll be glad that you did the right thing, even if they aren't. And this is what separates the men from the boys, or in your case, the women from the girls.

As you struggle through your 16th year, and mark my words, it will be a struggle, take a moment to look both behind and in front of you. What kind of impact have you already made? How have you affected those you've come into contact with? As I understand it, you're doing some kind of mentor work for kids younger than you. To say that I'm proud of you would be an understatement, but words are, at this moment in time, all I have to offer, so know that my heart is nearly bursting with pride at what you've already overcome. Rather than allowing your situation to define you, rather than allowing yourself to sink into the mire of your circumstances, you've risen to the top, like the cream in the milk. Not only that, but you've decided to make the most of it, using your misfortune to help others who are about to embark on the journey you've started so long ago.

Don't be fooled though. Your journey's just begun, so don't get complacent. Make plans for the future. Come up with a list of goals of what you want to accomplish, and in what order you want to accomplish them, and then don't let anything get in your way. If you need help, ask. Someone, somewhere, will always be willing to help, but that doesn't mean that you should be willing to accept the first offer that comes your way. Remember, "not everything that glitters is gold." You're going to find out that life will often send you people who appear to want the best for you, but who have ulterior motives, the like of which you could never begin to comprehend. At the same time, don't let that deter you. The world is also full of some truly wonderful people, located in places you'd never expect. Examine each that comes into your life, and make your decision based on the facts available to you, not emotions, and if facts aren't available, do some research and find some.

I wish I could be there with you as you take this next step in the journey we call life, but sadly, I can't. The powers that be have determined that it's not in your best interests. This isn't a choice I agree with, but at the same time, I can't say that I don't understand why they decided what they did, which is why I beg you not to be bitter about their choices. Their decision may not always be the right one, but it's done out of a concern over what's best for you, given the limited facts they have before them at the time. If it makes you feel any better, in two years, you'll be able to make your own decisions, whether they agree with them or not, and when that time comes, should you choose to contact me, I'll be here waiting with open arms.

I know that what I've said probably isn't going to do much here and now to help ease the pain and loneliness you're undoubtedly feeling here and now, especially considering the fact that you probably won't see this letter until well after your 18th birthday, but it's my hope that, when you do finally see it, you'll realize that I've **always** been here for you, even if you were never aware.

Love always,  
your father,