

# LIFE sentences

[ **SELF** ] Have you ever heard a sentence, a phrase, an expression... and added it to your mental 'guide book to life'? Eleanor Tucker remembers hers – and explores the value we can find in the words of wisdom that friends, family or strangers gift us with...

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Recently I met up with an old, dear friend. Fiona and I have been through it all together: teenage angst, boyfriend troubles, career woes – you name it. We must have had about a million conversations in our nearly 30 years as friends.

And on this occasion, we shared an afternoon of catching up over cocktails, in the way that friends who live a long way apart do. It is no overstatement to say it was life-affirming.

After a few of the aforementioned cocktails, Fiona told me that her new(ish) boyfriend was going to pop by and say hello. I was excited – he sounded like just the kind of man I'd hoped she'd end up with, but because of distance, I hadn't had a chance to meet him yet. He arrived, and was as I'd imagined – funny, clever, charming – and totally into Fiona. After a couple of drinks, he excused himself and went to the bathroom.

And that's when she said it. 'Remember what you told me, years ago, about James?' 'Erm... no,' I replied. In fact, I could barely even remember James, an ex-boyfriend of hers. And it wasn't just the cocktails – she was talking about a boyfriend she'd had probably 15 years ago, if not more. 'You told me that there was no tenderness – and that tenderness is what I deserve,' she said.

I couldn't remember saying it at all, but not only had my words prompted her to end that relationship, they had become a kind of requirement when it came to future boyfriends – a benchmark, a criterion, the box that had to be ticked if things were to carry on.

## The words that will get you through

However, even if I didn't remember saying that to Fiona, I realised I had sentences like this stored up myself. That one sentence someone had told me, filed away in my head in a mental notebook marked, 'These are the words that mean something, that matter. The words that will get you through.' (Imaginary notebooks get to have particularly long names, I've decided.)

It got me wondering if the people who'd told me them even knew of their worth. And was it something that we all did: gather snippets from the millions of conversations we have, and collect them, without ever writing them down? I decided to look through the notebook in my head and see what was in there.

That one sentence I've thought about so much as a mother came courtesy of my friend Jen. Again, she barely remembers saying it, but it's something that has popped >>>



>>> into my head time and time again since I had my first baby more than six years ago. Jen had a toddler – Joe – at the time I had my newborn, Jake. We sat one day sipping tea and talking about things such as weaning and whether Next or Gap do the best babygrows. Then the conversation turned to her toddler, and she said, out of the blue, ‘I know he’ll be OK – as long as he feels safe’. Her words resonated more than I can express.

Whenever I am worrying about my children (which is part of the job, it seems) I think of what Jen said, and do everything I can to make my two feel just that – safe. Because when children feel safe, they can be themselves, and flourish, and grow. Feeling safe is almost more than love – it is protection. So thank you Jen, for giving me that one sentence.

Another phrase in my mental notebook wasn’t even said – it was written down. Back when I was a teenager, I visited, with my sister and parents, an elderly great-aunt and uncle who lived in a little picture-book flint cottage in Buckinghamshire. My sister and I adored Ruby and Ted: he turned wood in his shed, she baked cakes, and they seemed eternally smiling and jolly. On that particular visit, it was my great-aunt’s 80th birthday, and alone for a minute in the living room, I nosed through the cards on the mantelpiece and stumbled upon the one to Ruby from Ted himself. Inside it read, in shaky handwriting, ‘Keep smiling, and keep loving me’. Even as a grumpy pubescent, all I could think was, ‘That’s what I want’ – someone to say that to me aged 80. Someone in it for keeps. And so that one sentence was stored away.

### Always something to learn from

Some sentences aren’t specifically about relationships, or parenting – they’re just about life. Three years ago, I sat at home with my baby daughter, anxiously waiting for news of my father, who was in his final hours. The call from my mother came, around 10 in the morning. And I remember it better than any phonecall I’ve ever received, but what I recall most about it is that one sentence my mother told me about my father’s final minutes. ‘There was so much love,’ she said. I’ve tucked that one away because that’s how I want it to be for me.

These are just three sentences from my mental notebook – but what about the other ones out there, those of my friends, like Fiona? I asked around, as I was curious

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to know what sentences others had stored, and intrigued as to whether their mental notebooks held anything that I could learn for myself. One of my favourites came from my friend Sara, a Scot.

‘My father once said to me that if I was lost, stuck or scared that I needn’t worry because I have a “guid Scots tongue in my heid”. In other words, if you need help, speak out and help will find you,’ she told me. ‘It instilled me with

an inner confidence from an early age – as well as an annoying habit of pestering strangers in the street, in shops, restaurants, libraries, airports, train stations, underground stations, bus stations, hospitals... But you know what? Thanks to that one sentence, I rarely get lost.’

### More powerful than you think

My friend Lauren’s sentence came courtesy of an old friend of hers – but is a lot older than her. ‘I was coming to the end of a relationship at the time, I was broke after working too long for too little money, and Lizzy, my oldest university friend, sent me a simple quote: “Be brave. Fewer bonnets.” I’ve forgotten where it’s from, I think maybe it’s an obscure line in a letter from one Brontë or Austen sister to another, but the origin doesn’t really matter. The point of it is that it bucked me up just when I needed it. My friend believed in me; she thought I could keep going through the difficult times, and she sent me this quote to bolster me. Ten years later, it still does that. I love the austerity of it, and the idea that you *can* somehow forge a path on your own with less than you might have thought you needed at first. You don’t necessarily need a lot of bonnets in life, just to know how to cleverly trim the ones you’ve got.’

The day after meeting up with Fiona, I kept thinking about what she’d said. I picked up my phone and texted her: ‘There was tenderness, by the bucketload. He’s a keeper’. Her reply, an enormous row of kisses, said it all. I smiled. What if that one sentence, all those years ago, had been what got her to right here and now? They might seem like *bon mots*, but maybe these sentences are a lot more powerful than that. Maybe they can take you down a path you would never have trodden otherwise.

I hope that, next time I come out with one, I remember it. And I hope that, next time I hear one, I add it to my notebook. There’s always room for more.