

The most difficult words to say ...

One of the hardest things for me to say to my parents is, "I love you."

I don't think I've ever said it. Maybe I feel it too strongly.

Everyone in my family is emotional, but we're all embarrassed by the display of those emotions.

That doesn't mean we don't yell a lot. Anger is the only emotion that doesn't embarrass us. It's not a sappy emotion, and it's often declared with self-righteous indignation.

When I was younger and still living at home, my mother and I would have terrible fights.

We could express our anger without a problem. She'd yell at me, and I'd scream right back at her.

When we'd shouted so long we were both too exhausted to yell anymore, we'd crawl, seething, into separate corners of the house, or stomp out the door, and go for a long walk until the anger had faded away.

For me, forgetting always came easily. I'd walk off, blow the steam out my ears, and eventually realize I'd been just as unreasonable as Mom. Then I'd hope the fight would never be mentioned again.

Mom would also forgive, but she found it more difficult to forget. I think she was afraid I'd hold her anger against her.

"I'm sorry, Karen," she'd say, later, when we were both in the same room again. "I love you. You know that, don't you?"

"Yeah, I know it," I'd answer with a lump in my throat. "It's all right."

But I could never say, "I love you, too, Mom."

The lump was usually too big, and I thought I'd cry if I tried to say it. Even though I'd already forgiven whatever the quarrel had been over, I wanted to maintain my dignity.

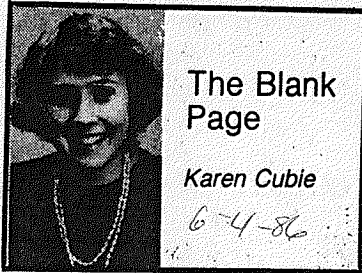
"Actions mean more than words," I'd tell myself when the guilt overwhelmed me. "Telling them, 'I love you' wouldn't mean as much as helping out around the house, doing dishes, or being cheerful."

My relationship with my father is not as stormy, but I've never told him I love him, either. I think he's always known, though. I guess it was never as much of an issue between us.

When I was little, I thought I looked like Dad.

"Until you were born, I thought my nose was broken," he'd tell me.

Although I thought he was perfectly handsome, he was balding, he sunburned easily, and his legs were as thick as tree



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6-4-86

trunks. Those aren't very attractive qualities in a woman.

I wanted to look like Mom. She was tall with dark skin and brown eyes, and she reminded me of both Sophia Loren and Mary Tyler Moore. I thought she was beautiful.

"Who do I look like?" I'd ask her.

"You look just like your father," she'd answer.

Since I've grown older, however, other people have commented on my resemblance to her.

"So-and-so said I looked like you today," I told her once, a little surprised.

"I've always thought you looked like me," she said.

"Why didn't you ever tell me?" I asked. "I always wanted to look like you."

"You did?" she said. "I thought you wanted to look like your father."

There was a time when Mom didn't think I even liked her.

"She thinks you hate her, Karen," Dad told me after a particularly bad fight. He was trying to play peacemaker.

"I don't hate her," I said, shocked. I guess at that moment I thought she hated me.

"She really loves you, Karen," he said.

"I know," I answered. But I couldn't even tell my father I loved her.

Once in a while I'd hear someone say, "I never told my parents

I loved them. Now they're dead and I'm sorry."

"I'll write her a letter, or send her a card," I'd think to myself. "She'd appreciate that."

But I never got around to it.

I thought I'd write her a column over Mother's Day, but the Silver Lake school committee did something stupid, and I wrote about that instead.

In church on Sunday, I heard the same plea.

"This time I'll do it," I said.

When I started writing, this column was for both my parents. But somewhere along the way, I realized my father already knows. It's my mother I need to tell.

Maybe I'm copping out because I can't tell her in person. I'm afraid we'd both cry. My mascara would run, my face would get all blotchy, and my eyes would feel like cotton balls for a few days.

So I think I'll have to write it. I love you, Mom.



When terrorists aren't terrorists