

A row of several old, worn books is shown on a wooden shelf. The books have various colored spines, including dark grey, brown, and light beige. The pages are aged and yellowed. The background is solid black.

Put  
things  
back  
where  
you  
found  
them\*

\*and other life lessons, shared by the women of Pfizer  
with their younger selves.



## Introduction

These 24 letters from Pfizer senior women leaders to their younger selves are an inspiring collection of heartfelt and deeply personal wisdom. While it may not be technically possible to share these letters with our younger selves, we can share them and their accumulated knowledge and advice with each other.

This book is modeled after a 2006 book entitled “*What I Know Now: Letters to My Younger Self*” by Ellyn Spragins. In the Pfizer spirit, we decided to do our own version. The letters were so moving that we decided to make them into a book to share with Pfizer women around the world. We hope you enjoy reading these letters.

A handwritten signature in black ink, featuring a large, stylized initial 'S' followed by a horizontal line extending to the right.

Susan Silbermann  
January 2009

A handwritten signature in black ink, featuring the name 'Sally Susman' in a cursive script followed by a horizontal line extending to the right.

Sally Susman



## Contributors

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Dear Sandy,

I know you think you will never get out of Kingsport, Tennessee. You are so wrong – oh, the places you will go and even live in some of them! Cool places with exciting people, events and things to do. You will get to watch so much TV you'll hate it. You will want to wear dresses again. You and the Lt. Governor's wife will laugh one day about the SubDebs and how they treated you. You will hardly ever visit Kingsport! So relax.

Relax about a lot of other things too: being fat, finding the right guy, fights with your father, and being accepted. Instead, spend all that energy, desperation, time and money on becoming a person who is ready to be a lawyer, live in New York and marry the greatest man on earth. Yes, you Ellie Mae will do all these things but you need to get ready.

In other words, don't bug out on Spanish class because Señor Hobbs is such a jerk, don't ignore principles of accounting just because Gerald Skinner is so arrogant to those who ask questions, and ask for help in accelerated math – early. When you get a letter from Vanderbilt regarding enrolling there, don't throw it away. There are scholarships for schools that cost that much even for families like yours.

But most of all, take that stubbornness and figure out how to channel it – not to fight silly rules, not to try to change every man you date, not to fight traffic, and not to fight authority in

general. Be stubborn, instead, about things that you can change – yourself, your spirit and your education. Grit your teeth, hold your breath, do whatever it takes – the good side of being stubborn – to work on yourself. It's not selfish, but it is very hard. Remember these quotes, write them on the mirror, memorize.

“When you become tolerant of the intolerant, everything else is easier.”

“Be present.”

“If you keep doing what you've always done, you'll keep getting what you always got.”

Remember, get ready!

Love,

*Sandy*



Dear Michele,

Today you are having your first real date. It's with Dad, you're 8 and you're going to dinner and a show. He will always make you feel special. Everything is perfect, he tells you that you come from greatness, you do anything you put your mind to and success is in your DNA. But, you must study hard and try things you don't know how to do – figure them out. He would tell you there's no need for self promotion – your good works, inner beauty, and goodness will be recognized by all.

It's 1972 and you are starting your first job (you will keep Dad's wisdom close to you). Dad got you this far, he helped to build your self-confidence. However, over the years, you came to see that it wasn't necessarily the "what" you did or "how" you did it, but about how you "fit." This is something you will wrestle with for the rest of your working life.

Growing up Dad never gave you kudos for what was expected – A's in school, personal integrity, always telling the truth. And while this seemed harsh at the time, it really prepared you for what you would confront in the workplace. Feel good about yourself and what you do – make an impact where you can. And, don't look for praise or recognition from anyone else – they don't give it when it's warranted and when they do, it's for the silly things that don't really matter.

Remember when you went to the playground and hoped the girls would choose you to play an activity? Sometimes you were chosen and other times you weren't, but you never really knew why. It's the same thing at work! Either you fit or you don't and you will oftentimes take it personally. Get over it, it's a season – make your mark where you can and move on.

You will learn that people will try to define success for you – the size of your paycheck, where you live, how big your house is, etc. Define success for yourself – work for the express purpose of making something or someone better. Stretch yourself – help someone you may not know or particularly like.

You will continue to have weekly dates with Dad, albeit by telephone. And when you ask him how he's doing, he will say "my day is wonderful because I'm talking to you!" You will thank him for teaching you the most important lessons in life (lessons that you will pass on to your children). He will teach you that a successful life's journey is measured by the impact you've made on lives along the way. It's your kind word or the unexpected gestures that will matter most – the impromptu telephone call or note that made a difference in someone's day. It's about the value you bring to the world and the workplace. It's about spending time with the people that love you and that you've finally learned to love in return.

Love life,

*Your Older Self*



Dear Leigh,

Today you spent a couple of hours with the partner on your first consulting study. You walked him through the model you had built in Lotus 123 over two weeks you have been on the team. (Twenty years later I don't even remember what we were analyzing – something to do with sales patterns for telephone systems marketed to small businesses.) You took him through the data, pointing out all of the numbers you weren't 100% sure were absolutely right since they were based on assumptions and estimates. You also made sure he was aware of all the aspects of the market you did not understand completely. He confirmed that the assumptions were logical and the estimates were reasonable and that you understood the important elements of the market. In between the disclaimers he was able to ascertain that the analysis supported the hypothesis the team was generating.

Tomorrow you are going to see this same partner deliver insights to the client based on your analysis. You know how uncertain you are about the analysis but you watch in amazement as he delivers the findings with confidence – and you know he knows even less about this topic than you do! He's not arrogant but is self-assured. You also watch how positively the client reacts to the confidence he exudes.

The partner has realized that, while you do not know everything about the topic, you have approached the problem in a far more

rigorous and analytical way than the client ever had. Pay attention as he emphasizes what he does know, not what he doesn't know.

In a few years, there will be many books written, seminars taught and coaching careers built helping women in business exude confidence and gravitas in the workplace. (For some reason, they didn't cover the topic last year at HBS.) But for now, you're on your own so remember that partner whenever you are tempted to focus on what you don't know rather than share what you do know or to start a sentence with "well, this might not be right but..."

Good luck at the progress review tomorrow.

*Leigh in 2008*

P.S. On the personal side, you are completely right in your conviction that being alone is better than being with the wrong guy (another topic where you have enough data to draw a pretty strong conclusion). You have always been very good at being by yourself and are pretty sure that at least half of your friends who are getting married are settling since they are not good at being alone. (Given the number of second weddings you will be attending in 15 to 20 years, you were right in a number of cases.) I just want to let you know that, despite a total lack of effort on your part, you will meet a wonderful man and then you will understand what all the fuss is about.



1986

Dear Karen:

Look at you sitting on the Amtrak heading back to the College of Mount Saint Vincent after a day of lobbying the NYS Legislature for increased financial aid for independent colleges. You are really proud because although you've never met a politician, never been to Albany and are kind of shy, you did a great job articulating the message and representing your school. You go, girl!

You happened to meet a new Senator who was different from all the others.

Senator David A. Paterson was young, smart, legally blind and although busy took time to learn about you, your issue and seemed genuinely interested. How amazing that he is actually your State Senator as he represents Harlem. Senator Paterson has a vision of how he wants to make Harlem a better place and have a positive impact on the lives of others. As you think about volunteering on his re-election campaign when you go home for the summer you'll have no idea how this encounter will change your entire life!

As the conductor announces "next stop Penn Station" you have a choice. You can get off this train and consider the day a novelty, head back to The Mount and pursue the plan you've

laid out for your life – prep for the GRE's, graduate college, go directly to Business School and land a big corporate job OR you can take a leap of faith and do something no one in your graduating class will do or anyone that you know has ever done.

I know it is hard for you see the opportunities that this train ride will present but believe me take the road less traveled. That is the road that will provide you with a career and not a job, excitement, challenges and enduring relationships and many, many memories. You'll campaign with Jesse Jackson as he runs for President of the United States; you'll dine with Nelson Mandela at Gracie Mansion upon his release from Robben Island. Your sights will expand past just changing your neighborhood but creating a world that your Grandmother would not recognize. It's not just about the work. While on this journey you'll become a wife and mother. You'll laugh, cry and grow in your faith.

Yep, this trip can lead you a long way from Harlem and it is okay because you'll have great friends who will offer you support over the years. Some friends come and some friends go and one of your dearest friends will be the Senator you met today. Did I mention he has a new job? Hang in there!

Love,

*KBT*



Dear L,

Life is a challenge! As you go through it, you will be told that you can't or won't be able to do things; that you don't have the right intellect or personality for the task or that you are just not good enough. Others will advise "you shouldn't apply to a prestigious school because it is too competitive"; "you will be happier at a non-Big 8 accounting firm"; "you're not smart enough to run the audit"; "nice Italian girls don't have careers"; "your idea is good but it can't work"; "you can't live by yourself"; or "that's a good idea but the time is not right." My advice to you is simply – Don't believe them and above all, don't let them put limits on you or silence you!

Although you may never find a mentor or boss who will strongly encourage you in your career, you will find others that move and inspire you, and you can and will (re)invent yourself on your own. Be mindful and thoughtful about the following lessons which will guide you through times of adversity:

Lesson # 1: Value yourself, always. You are stronger and more competent than you know.

Lesson # 2: Common sense is really not common! Have patience with those who don't have it.

Lesson # 3: For every weakness you think you have there is an underlying strength. For example, you have strengths like your strong will and determination to overcome adversity. Those who see them as stubbornness and unwillingness to submit may not want to see or appreciate what you can do.

Lesson # 4: Never doubt what you can do – you will accomplish great things! You come from a line of strong women who have dealt with adversity. Remember that both of your grandmothers came to America seeking a better life. They provided for their families by sewing piecework in the factories of New York City. Both of them would be amazed by the person you will become, astounded by the non-traditional (in terms of what is expected of nice Italian girls!) life you have chosen, but both of them would be bursting with pride.

Lesson # 5: It is okay to view the world differently than others, so don't work so hard to fit in. Your prescience allows you to see things before others do. Be grateful for this, don't be frustrated by those who wear rose-colored glasses and do what needs to be done to better the situation or avoid disaster.

Lesson # 6: Simon & Garfunkel sang "I am a rock, I am an island" and you seemed to think that was a life lesson. You may be a rock, but reach out and get to know the people around you. You'll find that many share the same concerns and issues and almost all of them like to laugh and have fun which you can definitely use more of in life.

Lesson # 7: Despite what people say, and even though you wish it did, the world does not always operate on merit. Be grateful to the women who came before you – right now you really don't understand the sacrifices they made to move women forward in the workplace. Besides your overall performance, people will factor in extraneous matters such as how you look and their own biases of how they think you should act when making judgments about you. Accept that fact, but challenge it when you can and then go back to Lesson # 1 on the list!

It took me a long time to realize these not so simple truths. Hopefully, with this guidance, you will now be poised to move forward and face the challenges of your life that await you.

With love,

*L*



Dear Cathy (you WILL be successful at getting people to call you Cathryn...Later),

Congratulations. If you're getting this letter in a time travel capsule from me, then it must mean you've made it after all. You've somehow managed to convince everyone (mostly yourself), that you really do have capabilities and skills that make you a valuable asset to the corporation you will work for. Please try to remember that your self-doubt and insecurity aren't the crippling flaws you might feel they are. Try to tame them and make them your friends. Because they are your built-in continuous quality improvement catalysts. They are what motivates and challenges you. They are what spur you to over-prepare (it turns out that part was true: you do have to perform at 120%). It is your winning tendency to insecurity and self-deprecation that keeps you from becoming complacent, self-satisfied, narcissistic, and, well...more like a man. So embrace self-doubt – it is you! And it is also part of a management style that, as you'll come to realize, really is a difference for women compared to men.

But wait, wait. There's one situation where it is, most emphatically, NOT you. And that's when you have a boss who is (how can I put this delicately) less than supportive. Your boss, and the group you work in, is a small ecosystem in which you spend a large part of your life. If this ecosystem is dysfunctional, then don't try to adapt: migrate to a healthier ecosystem. You did this when you left Delaware to join Pfizer, as frightening as it

was (and convinced your husband and all your kids to move, too – no small feat!) and hey, it turned out really well, not just for you but for them. So don't despair that first tough year in New York – you don't go broke and your family thanks you later.

The best way to realize that your ecosystem is toxic – and the fastest way to realize so many things – is to network with other women. And especially to find women mentors. Don't make the same mistake and delay reaching out to them. Most of them love to help. Keep in contact with those women friends also. They will probably save you more than once.

If I were you, which I appear to be (or will, if I could just lose those last 30 lbs) then I would take all the talk about work-life balance with a grain of salt. The whole idea works better if your engine wasn't running on such a premium blend of passion and guilt – but it is. Your life will continue to be chaotic, but let your sense of humor give you a modicum of equanimity amidst the Sturm und Drang of your personal and professional life. As you already know, love and passion are your lode – stars, so set your compass accordingly, and don't wait for the neatly drawn maps, they never arrived after all. So trust yourself – your instincts will not lead you astray. It's true that you may go off in the wrong direction sometimes, but the sidetrip will bring unexpected pleasures and benefits. One spoiler alert: you're going to have 4 children, and don't listen to your husband who said “honey, let's stop at 3, whaddya think?” – because the 4th one finally was your daughter.

Watching and helping her grow into the lovely and vibrant young woman she has become will be one of the enduring joys of your life.

A few final thoughts. For my sake, try to exercise a little more! And, for heaven's sake, get a good night's sleep as often as you can. I'm really trying to take care of my skin, and liberal use of Renova and ReVive simply can't erase 30 years of sleep deprivation!

Oh yeah, and as the years cascade by, keep humming in the back of your mind that song by Green Day from the farewell episode of *Seinfeld*:

"It's something unpredictable, but in the end it's right. I hope you had the time of your life."

You WILL have the time of your life – I am in a position to know!

Love and XXXX,

Your future self,

*Cathryn*



Dear Tanya (or Cheer, as your family & friends called you then),

What a journey it will be. I admit to being older now, but I'm not so sure I'm wiser. You are a surprisingly wise and insightful young woman; those attributes will serve you well over the years. I remember your obsession with *The Wizard of Oz* and your empathy and appreciation for each of the foursome...Dorothy, the Scarecrow, the Tin Man, & even the Cowardly Lion. You struggled to decide which was your favorite, and to this day you still haven't.

But in retrospect, it is clear to me which of the four makes me most sad. Without a doubt the Cowardly Lion breaks my heart. To go through life afraid of everything, while having to pretend to be something you're not; to not have as your core, a sense of who you are and what you're willing to hold dear, at any cost; to not know & protect that small part of you that no one can take away or damage, has to be the saddest fate.

My dear Cheer, you will have a charmed childhood, a challenging adolescence, an exciting young adulthood and a bittersweet mid-life, as those you hold most dear transition and move on. What you will cling to is the courage to continue to laugh, cry, yell and dance. The courage that only comes from knowing who you are and what you believe in. The courage that the Cowardly Lion came to far later in life than you will.

With all my love and admiration,

*Tanya Cheer*



Dear Gretchen,

It is July 1983 and you have just completed your first day of commuting from New Haven to New York. You are tired and discouraged and you and Dan agree that you will try it for one year – max. I hate to tell you this, but 25 years later you will still be doing that commute. Not only will you still be commuting, but you will have two kids along the way as well. Your challenge will not be the commute itself (there is some benefit from having some “alone time”), but rather feeling that the commute on top of your job and family does not allow you to focus on either as well as you should.

You will not find any role models as you work out your particular work-life balance, but you will be supportive along the way of other women who choose the same path. You will spend a lot of time over the years feeling guilty for leaving work early for some function at home, or feeling guilty for not attending the parent-child kickball game because you had a major presentation at work. You will waste a lot of time and energy worrying and feeling guilty – I can’t say this strongly enough – it’s not worth it! Your work will get done because you have a strong work ethic and your children (hopefully) will become reasonably productive members of society.

Relax and enjoy the ride through life because the kids will grow up and be out of the house in the blink of an eye. It would be a shame to miss it all.

Thinking of you,

*Gretchen*



Dear Jo,

Throughout your life, you have been a collector of quotes – words that resonate with you at a level that your logical mind can't quite explain. Often you share them with others, perhaps because you feel the wisdom of the words would be of interest to them. I think you should know that this wisdom is not just meant for others; these words are worth using as an internal compass to make sure you are living life in the direction you want to live. For the quotes that you most connect with are probably telling you something you feel is worth listening to.

It's not clear to me where this love of phrases came from, although I know you have collected phrases since you were able to read. Remember the tiny notebook in which you wrote quotes and the large purple bulletin board on which you posted them? And the numerous copies of *Desiderata* you received from friends as a graduation gift? You would re-read the phrases every now and again and think of how relevant the messages seemed to be. I encourage you to pay attention to these words as you move through life. Now that I'm in the middle of life, I realize that the times when I listen to my inner compass – the compass that these words tend to reflect – are the times when I am most happy in life.

To thine own self be true.

It may sound trite to quote Shakespeare since it's obvious he said many things that have survived the test of time. Still, these

words are ones that will never fail you as you face the pushes and pulls that life presents. Throughout your years in school and your personal and professional life, you will feel pressure to do things so that you can fit in – things that don't quite align with who you are or what you value. The times when you try to fit in vs. being true to yourself will be the most painful times. You will discover that sometimes it is just fine – in fact, it can often be quite good – not to fit in with the crowd. Once you reach my age you will know this, and you will know that staying true to yourself is what's important. This will result in a successful marriage, a successful career, good health, and a balanced life that is consistent with your values. But it can be hard to know this in the busy-ness of day to day life, and it can be hard to remember this in the pressure to conform. So I encourage you to listen to the wisdom of the words that speak to you and stay true to yourself.

There are many other quotes I could have chosen that resonate with me.

It's not the things you do in life that you regret, it's the things you don't do.

We are the stories we tell.

When one door closes, another door opens.

While I no longer have the purple bulletin board on which to post these words of wisdom, I now have learned to listen to the messages they are telling me. I encourage you to listen to these messages throughout your life.

With all of my love,

*Jo*



1994

Dear Carolyn,

You've always known what kind of person you truly are, but it will take you many years to realize it, accept it, and best of all, to stop berating yourself for it and to even be proud of what you have accomplished. To have a kind and loving family filled with mutual respect is a wonderful part of your life and you realize how fortunate you are. But then you immediately turn around and focus on all of the times you weren't there, the missed school plays, the fingers needing stitches while you were miles away, the feeling of shame while your neighbor tells you all about the winning hit your son made while you were sitting in a late-running meeting. The guilt builds when the very next week, you get on a plane to Manila, missing the game all together. You love your work though; you have a passion for it and you're driven by it! You're pretty good at it, too.

Don't waste years feeling guilty for not being the kind of person you were never meant to be. Your children will grow up to be wonderful men, kind, loving and respectful who will accomplish much in their own young lives, and then thank you for all of the lessons you've taught them over the years. Your new husband loves you for who you are as well, instead of adding to your guilt for not being able to do it all. You'll never be perfect – you never

wanted to be anyway – but at least you’ll come to realize that imperfection coupled with a good heart can be something to cherish as well.

With love and respect,

*Carolyn*



Dear Danni,

There's no one who had bigger aspirations for conquering the world than you did. I remember how much you used to dream but not about the things that most children of working class parents dream about. You dreamt about making an impact versus having material things. You've always wanted to help people discover new things about themselves and about life. What you didn't count on was that you would be your best student.

You also didn't count on losing your husband at such a young age (34) and realizing you never really knew what a gift he was to you and how much more he taught in death than in life. His music was something you never really understood fully during the 15 years you were together. The complexities of a master of avant-garde jazz will continue to elude you but what you will come to realize is how much courage he had to pursue his art at the highest possible level – only wanting to please one master – authenticity in the search for truth and passion will find you. You two couldn't have been more different in your professional lifestyles – you the buttoned up corporate-ite and him the week-old tee-shirt wearer always in bare feet. Life was never dull.

You think about him everyday in one way or another – whether it's wanting to share something funny that happened to you or hoping to get his advice on something. He'll help you with choices for the daughter you both adore but there won't be any

simple answers for either of you. He has taught you the importance of letting things go and not wasting energy on things you cannot control. His sudden death in the mid-90's stays with you like a childhood scar and there's a pact you will make with yourself about what you won't do again. You won't waste time – and you'll do what you love – the chance to get to it later may not come.

As you approach your mid-life years, you'll settle into ever-improving relationships centered on being a daughter, daughter-in-law, Mom, friend, and co-worker that are all shaping up to be closer to your adolescent dream. What you won't anticipate is continuing to be an important person in your 90-year-old mother-in-law's life. Perhaps it's a final tribute to one of the best people you've ever known while you're still working on that ranking for yourself.

*Danni*



**Never be afraid to be brave.**

Dear Marie Chantale,

Looking back, it's as if you always knew.

From the start, the way you were with her, the way you involved her in every aspect of your life, the way she inspired you, the way her pride in you meant absolutely everything to you, the way you thanked your lucky stars for having such an extraordinary best friend, the way you unabashedly shouted "I love you" too many times every day...it is as if you already knew that you would lose her – your inspiration – much too soon.

I remember how you used to relish every minute you spent with her. She taught you, you listened; she laughed, you laughed; she challenged you, you learned to be brave; she believed in you, you gained great confidence in your abilities and a strong belief that you could do absolutely anything you set your mind to.

She was blessed with laser sharp intelligence, a vivacious personality, an infectious passion for life, a smile that could move mountains, an elegant beauty and the flair to match. She was, most of all, loved.

Her name was Carole and she was your mother.

A few days before her passing, she chose to share with you her only moment of vulnerability. You were there. So young. She

had asked for you and you alone. She told you she did not want to leave you and asked that you be brave for both of you. She took your hand and told you how much she believed in you, that you had to be strong, for your father, for your sister, for your family. You promised. And you were.

When she died, you felt like you did as well. But you remembered your promise to her.

To this day, you live by that promise. It defines who you are, along with the many other lessons she taught you. No one is perfect, that is true. But I know, every day, you strive to be the person she wanted you to be.

You miss her more than anything, but her spirit never leaves you. She continues to inspire you now more than ever. You look back and now understand that when she asked you to be brave for both of you, she in fact left you with the greatest gifts: strength and belief in yourself.

Your mom would be proud,

“Hopefully the person your mother wanted you to be”

*Marie Chantale*



Dear Kirsten,

You can't answer the question "What do you want to be in 10 years?" Relax! Things will turn out differently than you think anyway.

Keep following your feelings and ambitions. Ask for what you want and fight for it; don't assume you can't do it or you are not good enough. The fear of failure is a terrible bug! Get rid of it! The only good thing about the bug is that it gets you up on days when you don't feel like getting up. But most times, the bug makes you sick. Self-doubt and focus on weaknesses is a waste of time. Build on and use your strengths.

If things don't go well for you, wait at least one year before changing direction. Overreaction out of frustration or pride is unwise! Most issues will work out easily if you stay confident and positive.

To be liked is nice, but you can't keep everyone happy. Be clear where you stand. Openness and clarity is the best way to gain trust. And by the way... other people do not feel as bad about most issues as you think they do.

You are on the right track trying to focus your attention on work and family and minimize everything else. Don't ever push yourself to have an orderly house...believe me – it matters

more that you are in a good spirit! A little chaos will not matter years later as you will have moved house several times over.

You are responsible for your balance. Work and Life balance is impossible to achieve. Don't stress out! It is really about "being out of balance on purpose" (Dan Thurmon). Always focus on what is most important at the time (work or family).

I find life is best when you focus on the positive side of things; to have a good sense of humor and not to take yourself too seriously.

And never force yourself into a role that is not right for you. Be true to yourself.

You should feel much better reading this!

Best wishes for some exciting years ahead

*Me/You*

(now twice as old and ten times as wise...and still not free from above challenges!)



Dear Lisa,

As you sit alone in the corner of the dark room, listening to David Cassidy croon, just know that what you recently experienced and what lies ahead in the next seven years will make you a better, stronger person.

When Dad died so unexpectedly and so quickly, you felt so alone and kicked in the stomach. Mom struggled to move forward with her life; left alone with little money; no will to provide for her, you and your brother. She was paralyzed with fear.

The anger you are experiencing and the following years of rebellion will form the woman you will become. Your ability to forgive Mom, accept her as the loving (if not “typical”) parent that she is, and form a close, lasting relationship will teach you so much about tolerance, empathy and unconditional love.

You will extend your experiences from that turbulent time of your life into many life choices: your courage to go far away for college, marry the man you love in spite of his family’s disapproval, build a strong career and most importantly – become a Mom.

So, keep finding solace in music, it will serve you well throughout your life. Enjoy the ups and the downs, you will have many!

Love,

*Your older self*



1976

Dear Mary,

Having just finished cleaning the teeth of 14 patients and having survived a flying sickle that was launched across the room by your dentist-boss who just had a fight with his wife, know that this is just a means to end. He is paying you nearly \$8.00 an hour (more than you could make doing anything else) and you are able to coordinate your work schedule as a dental hygienist around undergraduate and soon graduate school.

You will leave the life of plaque and periodontal disease behind and go on to do things you never knew existed in the world. You will meet people who will help you grow as a person and as a professional in ways that you never dreamed possible. You will experience things in business that few people are ever lucky enough to experience. And you will travel to and live in places that are a very long way from Defiance, Ohio.

You will have a lot of personal tragedy along the way but through it all there will be people who will do very special things for you and with you. Your career will help sustain you and there will be lots of baby show dogs to raise and train that will make you very, very happy.

So for now, learn what you can and take it with you for the rest of your life:

A smile is more important than you think.

Listen – you will learn so much more if you really listen.

Say you're sorry when you hurt somebody.

Put things back where you found them.

Clean up your own mess.

Sometimes people have to emote (e.g. the soaring sickle).

Don't take it personally.

Pet people will always relax if you ask them about their animal(s).  
You have to find the equivalent of a pet to connect with other kinds of people.

On occasion, people will be mean to you and you will deserve it (aside from the fact that most people hate going to the dentist, you really can be so annoying sometimes). But other times, people will do and say cruel things for no good reason. Try to help them in the same ways that other people have helped you.

Approach every single exchange with another person as a chance to learn something to make yourself bigger and better.

Remember, Mary, the best is yet to come.

Most sincerely,

*Your older self*



Dear Traci,

Please don't walk so fast across that stage as you receive your high school diploma. Okay you know it's just one small step in your journey to becoming an attorney but slow down and let your family savor the moment even if you can't. It's ok to keep your sights firmly on your goals in life, but it's also important to stop and enjoy your achievements from time to time too. Edmund Hillary used to say that when he was the most exhausted in his attempts to scale the summit of Mt. Everest, he'd pause for a moment and look back down the mountain at how far he'd already come. This small act gave him the energy he needed to keep going forward.

You will face many obstacles and setbacks in your journey, but you will always succeed in achieving what you want. When your faith is tested and your spirit is broken, always remember that you are not alone. You have a strong family unit and many good friends. And your father's words will sustain you over and over again as you face life's challenges and are the most afraid. "Traci, courage is not the absence of fear...it's marching directly into the face of it."

*Traci*



Dear Kristin,

I know you always thought you were destined to have babies since that was your greatest desire since you were a child. I also know that you have always joked that having babies was the only reason you could fathom why you would need hips as wide as yours. But things are not always as they appear or as you plan.

I know you are a perfectionist and an overachiever, so it has not occurred to you that this life passage will not be mastered on or ahead of schedule like the vast majority of women do across the globe under much worse conditions.

But your five year journey to motherhood will help define who you are and clarify what really matters better than any schooling or career challenge ever will. It will test your strength, your faith, your marriage and your self-esteem and you pass all of these tests with flying colors. I know that will seem hard to believe right now as you fall to the floor in a pool of tears after your fifth miscarriage but you need to believe in yourself and stay strong.

This journey to parenthood will teach you to fight for what you want with every bone in your body. To stay true to your goals and values, even if this means taking a detour from your career path.

What you need to remember is that you are a fighter. You must never give up on what matters most to you no matter how daunting the roadblocks seem. Your journey to parenthood will be an obstacle course through IUIs, IVFs, surrogates, multiple miscarriages, and adoption. But this journey will have a happy ending. You may not know how right now, but you know in your heart you will never give up so keep the faith.

As painful as this journey will be, it will strengthen you as no other challenge will. Fighting hard for what is in your heart will make you appreciate what you get in a way you never could have otherwise.

There will be time later to achieve your professional goals. So focus on what matters most to you and live in the moment. Don't be embarrassed or ashamed of your struggle or your need to step off the fast track to achieve your personal goals. Make your own decisions and be proud of them.

Much of the control that you have come to expect in your life is a mirage, whether over your body, your schedule, or your life. Remember that life's joys come more from the unexpected than the expected. That plans are great but flexibility and perseverance count for a lot more.

I've got your back,

*Your Middle Aged Self*



Dear Marge,

I know you feel that you are alone – your parents left you to be raised by your grandmother – one for alcohol and an early death, and the other for a new family to which she seemed far more committed, but that did not include you. And now your grandmother is also gone, leaving you, at 17, with your step-grandfather as the only one you hope you can count on.

But you will discover that you can take care of yourself and having no choice but to do so at an early age will teach you much. You will learn that you are able to get through whatever life brings you, and you will draw positives from each experience whether good or bad. You will find that these positives enrich you – make you stronger, more confident, and most importantly, a better person. You will become one that sees change and uncertainty not as a threat but as an opportunity.

This personal growth will lead to your professional success, and you will find great fun in working with others on whatever you choose to pursue. At the same time, and most importantly, it will bring you love of friends and family, and the joy of sharing life's most fabulous moments.

So not to worry young lady, you have within you what you will need to make your life worthwhile, and you will be blessed with gifts and opportunities that bring you great happiness and fulfillment.

Enjoy the ride!

With love,

*Marge*



Dear Marguerite,

You have been through so much in childhood and growing up, yet always have succeeded with a maturity beyond your years.

You coped by becoming so painfully shy and quiet that no one could believe it when you finally decided to study law – but that decision came later, when you came to understand that there are different ways to help people, the traditional view of law was not the attraction.

Your beloved Nana with her unconditional love is with you to this day, and her love and support gave you the strength to believe in yourself.

The academic side was easy, and your wonderful teachers had the wisdom and insight to free you to the library whenever you wished. You were too young to understand this gift, but your appreciation in rewarding them by giving your heart and soul to ensure outstanding results is a trait you have maintained to this day.

You always dreamed of traveling the world and meeting people of every culture, creed and race. You developed a love of art, literature, history and music, but were unsure as how to make a living from any of this. Following years of soul-searching, dedication and many years of sheer hard work, your dream finally came true. You could never quite believe it. You have

had the joy and privilege of working with wonderful people from all over the world, and the freedom to develop your own place and position. You have never compromised, you have always been yourself and you have come to realize that leadership and vision is something from within that needs to be shared.

Looking back now, you realize you have always been so hard on yourself, given your desire to give back in gratitude for the privilege and achievements.

You need to be kind to yourself sometimes, but that does not come easily.

Please continue to try – there are many people who need you, and there is still much to be done.

With love,

*Marguerite*



Dear Younger Self,

Your journey both personal and professional will be one to be thankful for and proud of. Take the time to enjoy the peaceful moments and reflect on how fortunate you truly are.

All those changes you were handed early in life meant you had to grow up far too soon. Be careful not to judge your past too quickly, as your experiences will become your greatest strengths in the years to come. You will become a caring mother to 2 beautiful children and provide them with a stable and secure childhood. They will carry forward your energy and zest for life, so get ready to support their many interests!

Your professional career will be full of opportunity and learning. You learned early on that hard work and perseverance counts and is often rewarded, although not right away. Your intense work ethic will land you that next great job time and time again, but you must remember the value in leading through others. Judge your success by the success of other leaders that you mentor and support.

Trust that you can not only survive tough times, but thrive as life will continue to be full of challenges. You will need to learn to let go at your most vulnerable moment. Waiting for those many minutes to face brain surgery will be worth the angst as you will not only survive, but you will learn to live your life with a higher level of purpose, appreciation and gratitude.

Lori, your adventure will be unique and well worth the journey. Remember to slow down so you can look back and look forward to maneuver the road ahead.

With love,

*Lori*



Dear Lisa,

It's Thanksgiving Day 1972, and you are surrounded by the love and support of your family. The only slight annoyance is your older brother, Tony, who keeps hurling playful (but really mean) insults about the Dallas Cowboys and their fans. Sadly, it looks like his insults are prophetic because they end up losing the game and you are so upset that you can't eat the great Thanksgiving Day dinner that your Mom spent the entire day cooking. First piece of advice, learn how to keep your support of the Cowboys in perspective and always eat Mom's cooking no matter what!

You don't know this now; but you will see that growing up with three brothers and your love of sports will be some of the experiences that you leverage as you break out of being extremely shy and quiet. You also have learned how to be very tough and resilient. Your toughness and determination is fueled by your Dad – the most important man in your life. He preaches to you that you need to “be independent and take care of yourself – more so than your brothers.” He, along with your Mother, instills in you an unbelievable sense of who you are and self-confidence.

Your toughness and resiliency will be tested many times in the years to come. As a result, you'll develop armor that you'll wear to insulate yourself. The biggest test of your will comes with the passing of your father. Somehow, you gather the strength that

you need and deliver his eulogy. Arguably this is the most difficult thing that you will do and, quite frankly, I'm not sure how you do it. Relying on the support of others is what helps you not crumble whenever you think about your Dad. One of the things that I want for you is to learn earlier that, at times, it is okay to be vulnerable and to ask for help when you need it; being vulnerable doesn't equal being weak.

Always remember that people are put in your life for a reason.

Love you,

*Lisa*



Dear Susan,

Just because your parents couldn't come to your college graduation doesn't mean you are alone. Your aunt and uncle – your second set of parents given that your mother's sister married your father's brother – are there, as is your only little sister and your cousin too. And your dad would have come if he hadn't had surgery 3 weeks before and couldn't make the trip.

More importantly you will think that day that you can't move your life forward without your mom, who is at this point only gone 4 years at the age of 48.

Look forward and fear not. You will continue to draw strength from what she (and your grandmother, her mom) taught you. You will need to try many paths to find your own but you will succeed. You will begin to understand that she can guide you despite the fact you can't see her. Your father, aunt and uncle will try to help you too – but you will know it is your mom's hand that has the strongest force. And your life will be filled with family and friends – male and female – who will be there to catch you when you fall.

It will take you a while to know, and several stints abroad to boot, that you should always, always, always be yourself. It is your best compass and it will never fail you. Working hard and

never giving up will help but only if it is something you believe in. Do that and you will never be lost.

Trust in yourself. The road will twist, turn and be bumpy at times but you have the built in wherewithal to make it. So look forward and go!

Love,

*Susan*



Dear Sally,

You will always have a love affair with words.

With words you will define the difference, call the question,  
ignite the debate and silence the critics.

Listen carefully to those that persuade and change your mind  
and to those that hurt and break your heart.

Be mindful how you wield words that are weapons.  
Remember that truth is the sharpest sword.

With words you will make the most beautiful things: poetry,  
lyrics and graffiti.

Appreciate each word, especially the ones that you hear  
with your eyes and see with you ears.

And always remember the funny thing about words –  
fewer is always better.

Love,

*Sally*



Dear Barbara,

Starting this letter hasn't been an easy task! I hesitated for all sorts of reasons, mostly about wanting to be able to reassure you now that I've grown in wisdom, that I follow the sound advice I so often and freely offer to others, and realizing that it's not totally true! I'm still learning and discovering. So, with that proviso made, here goes!

As you lay awake at night, as you ponder what next, listen to the wisdom of your parents – believe in your potential for greatness and don't worry, you may not know yourself that well right now, but you are on the right path and it's a long and fascinating journey. Trust me!

You don't feel connected to your name, Barbara, it hasn't sat "right" for many years, Barbara's are brunettes not blondes, aren't they?! Trust me, your name is absolutely right and it will shape your destiny. As Barbara, meaning "foreigner" and "stranger," you will leave the safe shores of your homeland, England, and follow your "named" destiny. You will live as a foreigner, accelerate your career, but most importantly discover who you are and where your personal greatness lies. Your values will be challenged, your convictions questioned, relationships will be lost over the distance, but you will delight in your life partner choice and you'll get the chance to together "never be

the same again,” freed from the culture and boundaries of home to be who you want to be.

It is going to be hard work but it’ll also be fun! Remember not to take things too seriously – as life moves forward remember the adventurer in you waiting to get out, and remember the girl in the playground who didn’t conform and who protected the bullied, helping others reach their full potential will be a key driver that will be increasingly important to you. Remember the girl who won the balloon debate as Helen of Troy, creative and enjoying the debate and influencing others to your point of view! Know you will be successful and just enjoy each moment, each stage, don’t be sad and wish for more. Banish that perfectionist driver and enjoy!

Learn to relax (I say that, but you probably never will). Pay close attention to family and good friends, enjoy art and reading, take time out to have fun from hard work, surround yourself with positive people, remember to dream and then make time to pursue those dreams. I guess that’s something I should note down to the “now” me – still lots of dreams I need to live!

Be confident and believe in yourself and your talents – you will discover as you go through various assignments that you are an intuitive with real clear understanding of people and what makes them tick. You will find you do have the strong ability to be strategic and creative. These qualities will surface, all your early experiences will build to that discovery.

I know that treading new ground is not easy, I know that being the first to go to University was tough in many ways – the first steps towards becoming that stranger to some of your family and a lost love. I know living abroad will have some significant

personal cost attached to it, that marrying later will mean no children, that relationships will grow and fade, that happiness can be fleeting but worthy of pursuit. That living for today, rather than in the past or the future is the healthy way to be. Forgive – holding onto things only damages you.

To have the chance to live it all again, with a little more insight, would have been so powerful, but life is one lesson and learning continues and that's what makes life so rich.

Be confident, be positive, take risks, have fun and enjoy!

Your older self,

*Barbara*



The Pfizer logo, consisting of the word "Pfizer" in a white, serif font, is centered within a blue oval. The logo is positioned on the left side of the image, against a dark background.

*Pfizer*

