



CELADON
BOOKS

JOANNA GUEST, AUTHOR

of *Folded Wisdom*, on Her Dad's Daily Messages

BY CELADON STAFF



Every day before school, Joanna's father wrote both her and her brother folded, illustrated notes.

***Folded Wisdom* is such a heart-felt book. What sparked the idea to create it?**

Throughout the years that Theo and I received the notes, they were so intricately connected to our every day. Sure, they were special to us, but they were also expected. So, they always felt like more of a treasured, personal experience than a collection of treasured *things* we might someday share with others (or even each other).

Then in 2008, an issue

of *Esopus* magazine came out featuring 18 notes stretching back to 1995. I had no idea what to expect when my dad asked me and Theo if it would be OK to publish some of our notes. I was comfortable with the idea, but also not convinced they would mean much to anyone aside from our family. Soon after the magazine came out, I realized I was wrong. Whenever I shared the story, people seemed not only touched, but spoken to. They'd describe how they, too, could glean some insight, or stop and pause to think about something my dad wrote to me.

After *Esopus*, I occasionally dreamed about doing something more with the notes, but the right time never seemed to appear. Fast-forward to the months following the 2016 general election. I had been working in politics for years and felt defeated and uninspired. I wanted to switch gears; do something that produced a tangible reward—one that could perhaps benefit others, and certainly make me happy. So, I moved back in with my parents and started digging through the piles (and piles and piles) of

notes that my mother saved.

When did you realize your mom was saving the notes?

Over the years, the notes that came home in my pockets occasionally went through the washing machine. It started to become clear by my mom's level of frustration whenever this happened that she might be doing something with them, somewhere. But I had no idea to what degree. I, too, felt terrible if a note was accidentally ruined, but it's not like I had a place where I was stockpiling all of them. It wasn't until I saw the proofs for the *Esopus* magazine [article] that I realized there were notes saved all the way back to the early years. Some were covered in lunchbox stains, others written on faded paper, and notes from before Theo could even read.

When you started the project, how did you choose which notes to feature?

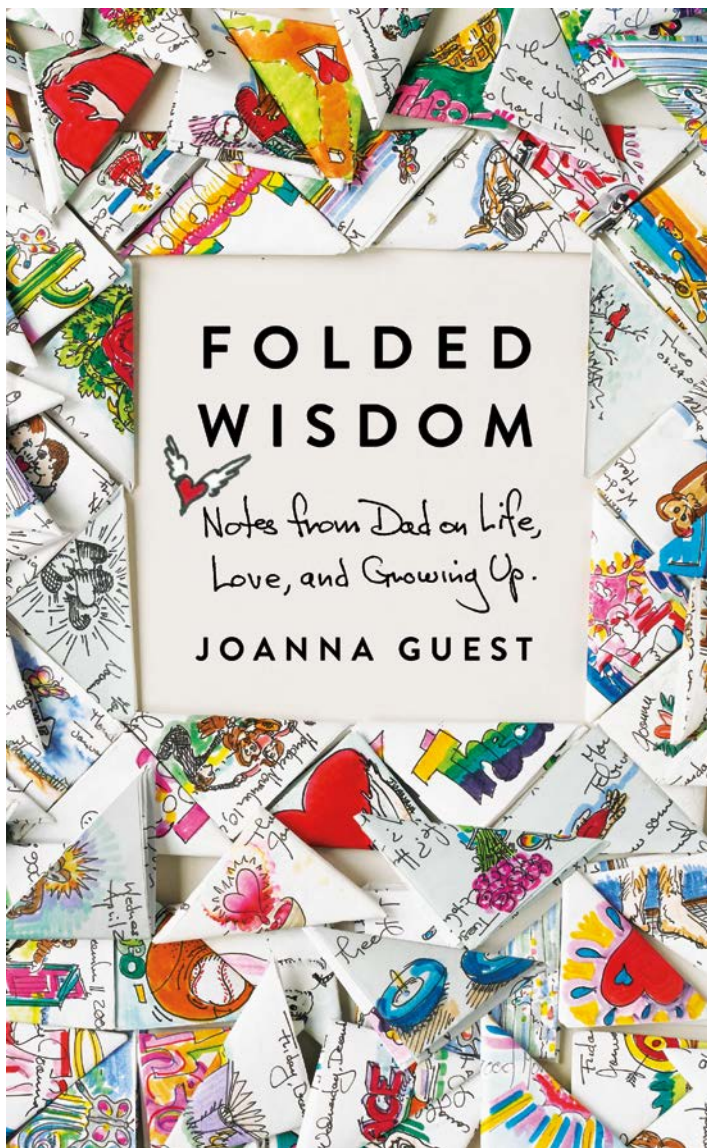
It took me about five months to read, scan, transcribe, and categorize the thousands of notes that my mom had

collected. Last I counted, there were 3,514 notes.

As I read, I'd find note after note carrying honest, genuine sentiments about relationships, compassion, personal growth, friendship, family, teamwork, civility, and the need for love that felt both relatable and worth sharing. I tried to pull together the ones that were especially touching, grouping them into themes that recurred again and again. From there, it was a process of whittling to end up with a small-enough collection that might fit inside the pages of a book.

Why are these notes so important to you?

One of the reasons I find the notes so endearing and rewarding to read is because of their honest imperfections. My dad didn't know what he was going to write to either one of us when he sat down at the kitchen table every morning. Writing the notes was a way for him to organize his thoughts and express himself. Sometimes he'd struggle to figure out what to say, and other mornings he was happy to just let his thoughts run wild.



Seeing how his thoughts trickled out to me versus Theo on any given morning, during any given phase of our lives, is part of what makes them so special to me. The whole experience of reading the notes is about understanding the value of human communication, and how we all differ in the preferred method of sharing ourselves with others. Not only did my dad have a unique drive to write to us about his thoughts, feelings, frustrations and more, but he wrote to each of us individually—because we were unique and different people. The repetitive nature of the notes, and the messages found within them, taught us that what he was saying was important, hard, and worth it.

Can you remember a note that stood out the moment you read it?

Oddly enough, the notes that probably meant the most to me in the moment were the ones that were specific—ones that provided advice and encouragement before a particularly tough test or told me to relax before a big game. Sometimes I remember reading a note like that a couple times a day if I needed to re-center myself, relax, and breathe.

Do you remember how it felt opening what you knew would be the last note?

I remember not wanting the notes to end and actively not thinking about what would happen when they did. All the notes from the end of high school were

special because I knew they were in their “swan song.” My dad was processing the emotions that came along with me leaving home at the same time I was experiencing (or trying to ignore) many of those same emotions. I remember being a little more diligent about saving the notes from those last couple months of high school. When I went off to college in Arizona, one of the first things I packed was the final daily note I got from my dad.

If you could point to a common thread running through the notes, what would it be?

Love. At one point in the book, I discuss how it’s possible that all of our notes could fall under the category of love. On a morning when my dad didn’t know what to write, or what to say, he knew that he could find somewhere to go if he just tried to express his love for us. In a note to Theo he says it’s OK if the word “love” doesn’t “seem cool” to a 12-year-old, but he suggests Theo “just think about it sometimes.” It was a message that was so often repeated: no matter what, if we tried our hardest, win or lose, we could always find happiness if we remembered that we had love.

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