

Alix Olian
Lowell House Student Speaker Series
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"Say It, Sign It, Repeat It"

Hi, everyone. Thanks, Sandy, for being my buddy and for organizing this whole project.

As I'm about to graduate, I've spent a lot of time thinking about what has happened over the last 22 years. I've changed a lot since I was younger: instead of crying until someone feeds me, I camp out in the dining hall so I'm never more than 45 seconds away from food. Instead of my parents dressing me, I rely on my extended blocking group of eleven other girls who are all more stylish than I am. I'd also like to think my taste in television and movies has gotten more sophisticated from the days of The Disney Channel. I have watched every single episode of Jersey Shore that exists, though, so the verdict's still out on that one.

But tonight I'd like to tell you about something that hasn't changed: something that's been constant for nearly my entire life.

To provide context, I will tell you about my younger brother, Josh. When Josh was born, he had some medical mysteries that to this day have not been solved. One of his unique characteristics was that Josh was unable to speak until he was about three years old. As this is much later than most children, doctor after doctor told my parents that Josh would never be able to talk, and that we should learn sign language to communicate with him. And because the Olian family is all for one and one for all, we started taking sign language classes – grandparents, cousins, my babysitter, everyone. One of my earliest memories is of a huge, wall-length poster my mom put up with all the different alphabet signs for us to learn.

Luckily, Josh learned how to talk, just a little late. Accordingly, my family stopped signing, and today there are only three signs I remember: milk [demonstrate] – one of the few foods Josh would eat at the time, pig [demonstrate] – my favorite animal, and I Love You.

I remember I Love You because of a tradition that has been important to me since age 5 or so, continuing to today. Since we learned the sign – which is composed of the signs for "I," "L," and "Y," my mom and I have signed I Love You to each other nearly every time that we say goodbye or goodnight.

But that's not all. We also say "I love you" aloud when we sign it. And that's not all, either. Often, I'll make the sign; say the words; and also ask my mom "Promise?" – which means, do you promise that you love me. And she always replies "Promise."

I remember when I went to overnight camp, I would think of my mom signing and saying "I Love You" and "promise" to me when I left. Being able to visualize and hear in my head how much she loved me staved off homesickness. And just a few weeks ago, when I was home for winter break, my mom and I continued our tradition when my parents dropped me off at the airport to return to Boston.

Even over the phone, when we can't see each other sign, my mom and I will tell each other, "My hand is up." It's not that I have ever had a reason to doubt my mom's love: I just delight in hearing her insistence. And so we affirm our love three times: we sign it, we say it, and we repeat it.

Last week, I was riding the subway and there was a cute little baby girl next to me. She was staring at me (I think she must have been appalled by how red the cold had made my cheeks) and so I waved at her. She smiled back. Now, maybe it's something to do with my biological clock, but I wanted to befriend this little girl. So I played Peekaboo. Afterward, I thought about the game. We all know how to play: you hide from a child to make her upset and then you show her that you're there to make her happy again.

Although many of us might think that the baby I was playing with is less intelligent than we are – and in many ways we would be right – I think that the baby was onto something. She wanted affirmation, she wanted to see what older people all know: when we duck behind our hands, we're not going away.

The younger Alix who created the tradition with her mom of signing and saying "I love you" and "promise" was also seeking affirmation. Although I fully knew that, even without saying a word, my mom loved me more than anything, I still wanted to be reminded of it.

What can we learn from the perspective of a child seeking reassurance, or a child who grows into a 22 year old and still seeks reassurance? That, although we may not need to, there is joy to be found in continually reminding people whom you care about that you are indeed there for them and you do indeed love them.

So sign it, say it, repeat it.