Family Elders

I was terrified of my grandparents when I was young. They were loud, funny looking, and intimidating. I spent most holidays and get-togethers wedged behind my parent’s legs, trying to avoid them at all costs. I was actually lucky enough to have a great amount of elders still living when I was little: both sets of grandparents, three great-grandparents, one great-great-grandparent, and a few great great-uncles and aunts. I saw all of them regularly, and was too little to actually appreciate the visits. It wasn’t that they were mean spirited; I was just easily intimidated and shy as a girl. Little did I know that they would become some of the most treasured story tellers in my life.

My grandma and grandpa Cesarz were the exception to this list. Perhaps this was due to the fact that my grandma Cesarz would give us treats every time we saw her, but as a young girl they were by far my favorite. Sleepovers, fishing expeditions, and shopping trips happened often. The only downfall (in my eyes at the time) to staying overnight at my grandma Cesarz’s house was that my great-grandma lived there—and she was very scary. One summer evening my sister Kathryn and I were eating dinner with my grandma, grandpa, and great-grandma. Oreos were for dessert. Kathryn asked me for an Oreo, I rolled one across the table to her. “Don’t roll cookies!” my great-grandma grumbled. This simple line made my face burst hot. I quickly ran away from the kitchen, into the family room, where I sat on a couch and cried. I kept telling myself how much I hated my great-grandma.
School years passed, and when I was in seventh and eighth grade I found myself becoming more open with my relatives. Instead of being scared by my great-grandma, I would talk to her and tell her about my life. She said what she thought and spoke the truth about everything. If she hated what you said, she’d let you know. If she thought that the roast tasted like crap, she’d tell you that, too. I liked that. Soon, we began to get along. One summer she pulled me in to the kitchen and taught me how to properly set a dinner table. I can still picture her shuffling around the table in her big blue slippers, setting the forks and knives in their proper places. She was an avid crocheter. I asked her to make me an afghan for my thirteenth birthday. She came to the party in August and, during bites of cheesecake with blueberry sauce, I opened her gift of a beautiful peach and white blanket. She died later that October.

I didn’t think her death would affect me as much as it did. At the time I was an altar server for church, as was my sister. We served mass at her funeral. I was okay, didn’t even feel sad, until we were processing out and I started sobbing as I walked down the aisle. It was after that day that I began to appreciate my elders in a way I never had before.

It wasn’t long after my great-grandma’s death that her brother, my great-great-uncle Ted, became ill. I had been close to him because his wife was my godmother, but she had died when I was too young to understand. He would burst into the house on holidays, “Hello, hello, hello!” Always the three hellos. He had been in World War II. My dad was fascinated by this and would often ask him stories about the war. He refused to tell us anything. He didn’t like to think about it, he said. It wasn’t worth talking about, he said. When he was in the hospital, he told my dad to give me a pin he received for being in the war. It sits upstairs in my dresser. Uncle Ted
left his house to my father. We spent two weeks one summer, my dad and I, cleaning the house, fixing it up, so it could be sold. The things we found in his basement that my Uncle Ted had stored away from the war were amazing: a Nazi flag, knife, and sword, paintings from Germany, photographs, medals. They were relics without a story. The stories had died with my uncle. We did our best to figure out the history behind some of the items, but knew that we would never know their true origins. His passing made me realize the importance in learning as much about my elders as possible. I didn’t want the stories to die with them.

My Nany and Grandpa were my other set of great-grandparents on my mother’s side. When they were around I was still too young to appreciate them, and when I grew old enough to actually want to converse with them, it was difficult to because of how ill they had become. Most of my family came from Poland (my great-great-great-grandparents if you want to get technical). My Nany and Grandpa would speak often of the history behind this, mention the language, cook the food. Pierogis were a staple at any family get together. Nany and Grandpa had traveled everywhere. Egypt, China, Australia, all fifty states. My great-grandpa was a brilliant man who would spend hours debating topics with my father. I tried to listen to my Nany and Grandpa the best I could, but I had very little memory of them other than the nearly blind, frail forms they had become. It made it difficult to be able to understand them. And then they were gone, those two brilliant people who had seen so much, things that I have only seen pictures of. Who had left footprints near the pyramids and tire marks at Mount Rushmore. Who had lived their lives to the fullest and appreciated every moment of it. They were gone.
I am lucky enough today to have both sets of my grandparents around and am now extremely close to them. The history and culture that they have shared with me are stories that I will treasure forever. Not only do I know about them, but they have been able to tell me about my older relatives that I didn’t get to spend as much time with. They tell me lessons about life, about their views on the world, on society and the economy, race and class, and it is entirely fascinating to digest and listen to how their older generation views the world. Their focus is on the working and middle class. You get a modest job, do your work, earn your keep. Don’t make a lot of noise, just settle in to place. They have prejudices against African American, Asian, and Hispanic people and are reluctant to change their views. Technology is moving far too quickly for their liking. Healthy eating fads are bull—they would much rather still cook with bacon grease, thank you! Speaking of health, all of these new medications are unnecessary (“They weren’t around when we were young and we’re perfectly fine!”) They talk of the time when the ice man, the milk man, and the coal man came to the house. They talk of the time of bomb shelters and when you could trust the mailman to walk your daughter to the bus stop down the road or leave your children sleeping in the house and go to the neighbors for a drink.

What is most surprising to me in all of their stories is the different mindset their generation had compared to how our society works today. Our lives are permanently set on fast forward in an I-want-it-now mentality. We are always plugged in and reachable. Information comes at us by the ton. The problem in all of this is that many people no longer take the time to think about, or appreciate, how our life today has become our life today. It isn’t always the fault of the person—many people grow up never having known their grandparents. But there are always the cases in which people simply didn’t take advantage when they had the chance. So, if
you fall into one of those categories, what are you supposed to do? Accept the fact that, like my
great-great-uncle Ted, the stories of past relatives will forever go unknown? Perhaps. There is
always the option of visiting a nursing home, which seems to be a place full of elderly
individuals thirsting for younger company, and another opportunity to tell their own story
(maybe for one last time). What if visiting a nursing home isn’t the answer either?

What if the most important thing for us to today is to, during the time of “go-go-go,” take
a moment to think about what we have come from and appreciate it? To have a second of
gratitude towards what those before us worked for so we could be where we are today. After all,
someday it will be us in the nursing homes, hoping to come across one last person to tell our own
story to (“Back in my day, an iPod and a laptop were all you needed…and Pluto was a planet!
You would not believe how many people joined that group on Facebook.”)

Without my grandparents, I wouldn’t notice these things. I wouldn’t think about the ice
man or the coal man or the milk man. I wouldn’t know about bacon grease or Pierogis or
homemade dill pickles. I wouldn’t know about Poland or how the railroads worked when my
great-grandpa was there. I would only think about iPhones and Myspace and hydrogen cars and
Starbucks. Laptops and Google and Wikipedia. Instant Messenger and Harry Potter and
Spongebob and microwave popcorn.

In developing relationships with my grandparents, they have added another dimension on
to my life. They have shared information with me that is absolutely unobtainable elsewhere and
have given me an appreciation for how far our society has advanced today. They will keep
telling me their stories about Sunday drives through Milwaukee, going to church every day of the
week, and when television was brand new in black and white. They will keep talking about how
much food costs today and how the immigrants are going to take over. They will keep telling me about the time before air conditioning and ceiling fans and hot drives to Florida with the windows of the station wagon rolled down all the way. They will tell me about how they picked used gum off the sidewalks because their mothers wouldn’t allow them to chew it. They will tell me about my great-great-great-grandma from Poland throwing flour around the kitchen as she cooked food in only a slip. They will tell me their history, the stories about what shaped their lives and, essentially, what has shaped me. And I will listen.

I will listen.