

Preparation for What You Learned from Your Grandparents

Most traditional cultures honor their ancestors with practices that keep them alive in memory and offer them a respected place in present day life. The same is true for their living elders. In western civilization, the world we inhabit changes so rapidly, each generation is born into a cultural reality that separates it from its forebears. Thus the “generation gap” we’ve all no doubt experienced, one way or another.

As members of the *homo sapiens* tribe, our ability to adapt to changing conditions has been a major means of survival over the eons. We seem to be almost infinitely malleable. In our present world, we face the unprecedented challenge to human adaptability posed by the takeover of a digital technology that pervades almost every aspect of our personal and collective lives. As we age and adapt to a society turning ever more virtual, perhaps it’s time to reclaim the legacies from our past that can help us navigate these cyber waters by preserving what wisdom is to be found in the human experience of those who came before us.

In particular, we may find sustenance in looking back to the pre-digital era former generations inhabited to see what they have passed on to us. In doing this, let us look beyond virtuous parables about hard work and upholding responsibilities and apt folk aphorisms such as *Too soon old, too late smart*. Those have their place, but the hidden gold is to be sought in the implicit messages our grandparents conveyed by their ways of being human and finding meaning in life.

It can be difficult to imagine what their lives were actually like, inside out. The contours of their stories comprise their historical era, their ethnic origins, their social roles, their religious affiliations, their accomplishments, their challenges and much more. These are implicit in family stories, but it’s up to us to imagine between the lines regarding what their experiences were actually like for them. What can we intuit of their inner lives, their sources of strength and courage, their hidden wounds and fears, their unspoken conflicts and confusion? What sense of identity did they show? By what were they inwardly guided? Was there wisdom in their ways of being human?

Those who were adopted may have both adoptive and birth grandparents to consider. If there were no grandparents present in your childhood life – or if you didn’t like the ones you had – think back to trustworthy mentors and caregivers of that generation, perhaps a great aunt or uncle, perhaps an elder neighbor or old friend of the family, perhaps a weathered teacher, vintage coach, or gray-haired guidance counselor.

In returning to our formative years in search of what our grandparents or their stand-ins most tellingly transmitted to us, let us remember them with ears attuned to what it was like to *be* them, listening for the messages that got quietly transmitted. What can we garner from the examples they set? What can we intuit from how they dealt with relationships? What do we sense about them as individual people with a particular presence in the world?

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Grandparents can be very special resources. Just being close to them reassures a child, without words, about change and continuity, about what went before and what will come after. *Mr. Rogers*

Our ancestors are totally essential to our every waking moment, although most of us don’t even have the faintest idea about their lives, their trials, their hardships or challenges. *Annie Lennox*

When she smiles, the lines in her face become epic narratives that trace the stories of generations that no book can replace. *Curtis Tyrone Jones*

Whatever you are is because of what your ancestors have done. *Li Lu*

I have a profound interest in embroidery, as I have female ancestors on both sides who embroidered their way through great trials. *Emil Ferris*

No one who has not known that inestimable privilege can possibly realize what good fortune it is to grow up in a home where there are grandparents. *Suzanne La Follette*

The very old and the very young have something in common that makes it right that they should be left alone together. Dawn and sunset see stars shining in a blue sky; but morning and midday and afternoon do not, poor things. *Elizabeth Goudge*

A grandparent is old on the outside, but young on the inside. *Anonymous*

The evening of life brings with it its own lamp. *Joseph Joubert*

When we connect with our ancestors and put their wisdom into action, we are evolving our collective consciousness. We are transporting the ancient truths of our collective past and birthing them into our future. What we create out of those truths extends the wisdom of all those who have gone before us, and it provides a guide for all those who will follow. *Sherri Mitchell, Weh'na Ha'mu Kwasset*

Questions to Ponder

1. What was your childhood relationship with your grandmothers and your grandfathers like? What was your relationship with others who filled that role in your life?
2. By what values did your grandparents live? What mattered most to them? What brought them joy? What troubled them?
3. How did your grandparents deal with afflictions and trauma? How did they cope? What were their strengths? Their weaknesses?
4. What were your grandparents' styles of communication? How did they relate to other people in public and in private? How did they deal with interpersonal conflicts?
5. How do you see your grandparents as fitting into the gender roles of their time?
6. What did your grandparents teach you, explicitly and implicitly? How have your learnings from these forebears affected your life?

Words of the Day

Before coming to the Gathering, reflect on these questions. The Words of the Day sentence is “What I now find most valuable in what my grandparents passed on to me is ...”